

by Julius Horwitz

THE INHABITANTS
THE CITY

Can I Get There by Candlelight

Julius Horwitz, who was here with the US Army Air Force during the war, has revived the London of those days in a novel of tremendous evocative power.

His hero is a young man with a dream of Europe. He had not bargained for the sudden glimpses of its truth which he catches when he meets Laura in a pub off Tottenham Court Road. Laura, a painter, used to live in Paris. She used to know as friends and lovers people whose names have become legendary.

Through Laura he meets a group of the London Bohemians of that time (brilliantly portrayed), and also Lennie, a girl who would be the answer—if she did not have a husband. The novel combines the story of his love affair with Lennie and a moving picture of a boy discovering life's potentials during, and in spite of, the nightmare of war.

How many miles to Babylon?

Three score miles and ten

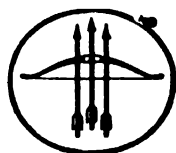
Can I get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again.

Julius Horwitz

can
I get
there by
candle-
light

André Deutsch



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TO *Lois* AND *Jonathan* AND *David*

Can I Get There
by Candlelight

1

My first captain I won't ever forget. But he's not the subject of this story. I am. My captain's name was Allen Owens. The Government woke him out of his sleep in Kansas and gave him a hurried commission, reminding him that wars don't end in our century. He tried to hide his aging stomach by pulling a GI belt tight into his white flesh, flesh I had seen by mistake when I strayed naked into the officers' shower room, the steam hiding the officers from the men, and I will never forget how startled he looked, as though I had surprised him in the act of being human. He died holding a practice grenade longer than the count of five. The grenade exploded in his hand on Thursday at 10:30 A.M., destroying what was left of him. He had never succeeded in hiding his stomach and he had never succeeded in being a captain again, for he didn't believe in the war and he didn't know the Germans he was fighting, the medieval Germans resurrected by Hitler. He tried hard to think of himself as the father of our compound of Nissen huts because he was as frightened as we were of the vast war. A father, I like to think, is a man who has nothing to hide except his growing awareness that we must live as bravely as we lie down to sleep.

I thought of my captain as the train from Ipswich

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entered the rows of ugly London yards, as ugly as the entry into New York City, those great Harlem flats with windows that reveal as much as they hide. I was on my way into London to see Nora, Nora who among other things would live forever because Modigliani had carved her head out of a hunk of marble he and Nora found in a Montparnasse junk shop. Modigliani had carved Nora's head to look like an African princess raised by an English governess. Nora told me she was sick she hadn't held onto the hunk of marble. She said it would now pay all of her bills, including her death duties. Nora showed me a photograph of the marble head taken in her studio on the Boulevard Raspail. It was a great head. Modigliani knew what he was doing when he chose Nora's head. Nora had a fantastic head. Now it looked like the head of a battering ram. But when Modigliani went to work on Nora's head it was a young head, straight from an English boarding school, a head that crossed the Channel to begin an assault on life. And we all know what happens to heads that try to assault life. Nora didn't escape. She banged and banged her head until it was now necessary for her to keep it soaking in compresses of gin and bitters. And she let me, whom I'll only identify as a young American soldier (until we get to know one another better), she let me go backward into her time, the extraordinary days when Paris created almost as many legends as Homer.

Nora would never die. But my captain, bloated and lost, stumbling around the muddy walks of our compound, shouting *hup two three* and wondering if he would survive a heart attack, my captain was sensibly killed by a grenade. He probably died like those men in

the Alps who jump into the abyss rather than risk the leap between mountains. I saw my captain buried on Friday, all of us standing at attention, the bugle sadly echoing in his dead ears, his body lowered like ballast into the hold of a ship, the sad row of medals from World War I strung across his chest. He didn't have enough time in World War II to earn any medals. I think he should have been buried in Kansas, in one of those cemeteries where no one looks as though they stay dead overnight. He didn't belong in the Suffolk earth where some of the English had been dead for a thousand years. I sadly liked my captain, for out of the accident of war he was the man chosen to censor my letters and I had chosen letters to say what I felt about the war. We believe all of us in the sanctity of the Post Office. My captain was the only one in the outfit who censored my mail and he knew more about me than anyone in the warring world and it made me feel good to know from Sirota, the mail clerk, that our dead captain used to wait for my letters to be written as though he was voyaging with me into London and further.

He was the first man I knew to die in the war. We yelled at him to fling the grenade out of his hand and go on living. He heard us. But the grenade stuck to his hand. And after the count of five, it shattered him. He had no chance to tell us why he had held on to the grenade. He was dead before we got to him. He had no business handling a live grenade. We weren't a combatant outfit. We were attached to the Eighth Air Force, or part of it, I never knew. But it was rumored that the Germans were planning parachute jumps to seize the English air fields. And my captain thought it would be a

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good idea if we knew how to use the guns and equipment that had been issued to us. I had a magnificent carbine I had never fired.

The last letter my captain read was to Buber. Buber had been discharged in Indiana after a fall in an Evansville diner that broke his leg. He returned to New York to edit a monthly, out of the war that he hated, though I think and know he loved a big chunk of the war. He loved the PX, the latrines, the grubby mess halls, the soldiers' talk, the trips into town, the booze, the drunks that sprawled him out in his cot, the wild instances of unexpected homosexuality in boys from Canton, Ohio, madly in love with boys from Rochester, New York. Buber was older than me by ten years, those enormous years from the twenties to the thirties. Buber had published tough literary criticism in tough quarterlies. I listened to him when he spoke. Buber liked me because I had written a sketch at our training base in Ohio and I gave him a part in the sketch, which meant he didn't have to pull KP. KP he hated. He told me that all of the irrationality of the twentieth century couldn't drive him nuts but the KP routine would send him roaring into the Section 8 compound. He almost murdered a cook. Buber told me not to be afraid of words. He said the fuckers will want you to be afraid of words, to play along with them, to keep the secret that we don't know shit. Buber told me when I was ready to go overseas, write down whatever you want to, don't be afraid of those lieutenants reading your mail, words are all we've got on this earth to prove that we're human. Buber said I should write with a cold fisheye and not get sucked into writing. He said if you want to know anything about American

writing then read Hawthorne's introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* or find out why Melville worked as a customs inspector.

I wrote Buber the letters my captain read. Letters about the troop ship, a big floating hell, Scotland and the insane bagpipes that greeted our arrival, the air base and the first startled look at B-17s blowing up. And London. The thousand-year-old city of London with eight gates and ninety thousand whores. London blacked out. London sandbagged. London that would not appear in any future history books. Two hundred thousand American soldiers pissing and fucking in the doorways the minute the sun went down and no lights went on. I had my first whore on Regent Street, in the blackouted doorway of a London tailor, the whore stooping on one of the most civilized streets in history. My captain read the description of the whore and looked at me in awe the next morning. He could no more hide his enthusiasm for more letters than a baby can hide its tears.

But most important were the letters about Nora. My first six months in England were spent in getting drunk and wondering what West End whore would finally give me the pox. But after I met Nora I forgot about the whores. Nora gave me a destination to go to when I got out at Liverpool Street, and until you've been a soldier, you cannot appreciate what it means to have a destination. War has a destination all its own. War likes to make us feel that we finally have a common goal in life, as though, finally, a great blackout is lifted from the human race and we finally realize that everyone on earth has to get through life at least once in a lifetime. We will never end war. But neither will we ever end that ecstatic ring-

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ing in our heads for peace that is the delight of the saints and terror for the rest of us. Nora wrote me that she had a surprise for me, and for Nora to write that there were still surprises in the world was the greatest surprise of all.

I thought again of my captain as the train entered London. He had read the letter to Nora saying that I would meet her at the Dog and Duck. He had read the letter booking a hotel room off Regent Street. He had signed my pass, the three-day pass that permitted me to exit from the British base where the Flying Fortresses circled in precise formations for the flights to Occupied Europe. I couldn't think of my captain as dead, not completely dead. The dead are never flung so quickly from our sight as we like to pretend.

Some of the dead I could think of as dead. The Flying Fortress crews ferried over from the States who came into the headquarters building to register their names and to learn where they were to sleep and eat and to see the monstrous hangars from which they would exit to die. The pilots who vanished into the North Sea and Europe, their faces hard to recall because they all had the finished look of the dental students at Columbia. They were irrevocably gone. I had no memories of them. But I had a dozen memories of my captain. I first saw him in Ohio wrapped in a PX trenchcoat coming into the Orderly Room to announce he was our captain. He broke up a crap game and our twelve-hour reverie that no captain would ever come to take charge of us and we would end out the war in Ohio, riding into town to buy state-controlled whisky and sleeping with the Ohio River girls who unpeeled like soggy oranges.

I never knew whether I was writing to Buber or my

captain when I began a letter, probably both, for both were my listeners, the listener that has become the ideal figure of our time. I needed a listener. I think we're all a little afraid that soon we'll have no one left to listen.

The train came slowly into the roaring Liverpool Street Station and the RAF man in our Third Class carriage pulled open the door and jumped out onto the platform, happily carrying away the pack of Camel cigarettes I had given him. I liked Liverpool Street Station. It was dirty and jammed with uniforms and looked like a stage set in a World War I movie. And outside, on Bishopsgate, to the east, were the great sullen London thoroughfares that I had walked like a dray horse. I like England. I like small countries. I like small cities. I like a place you can walk in. New York is such a city. You can walk in New York. But who would ever dream of walking in Columbus, Ohio? London was available for walking. The West End thoroughfares had soaked up the German bombs but in the East End of London the thoroughfares had soaked up blood. The German *Focke-Wulf Kuriers* were still coming over London. Nobody knew why the Germans still let Goering send bombers over London. But the bombers came. Each entry into London made me think of the bombs. I could never believe that bombs were falling on London, that bombs had fallen.

And I could never know if a German bomb had fallen on the Dog and Duck, or on Nora, or on any of the people she had introduced me to, I could never know until I nervously approached the Dog and Duck from Tottenham Court Road. Nora told me she had lived through Paris of World War I and London. She said the first air raid on London took place on May 31, 1915, two days

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before she missed her first menstrual period and she thinks the raid brought her period on. The English historians counted 922 bombs dropped on London in World War I. I counted the thirty-year difference between me and Nora. Nora had known Pascin, Modigliani, Bernhardt, Braque, Brzeska, Nancy Cunard, Diaghilev, Chaplin, Epstein, Ford Madox Ford, Gide, Max Jacob, Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, George Moore, Picasso, Rudolph Valentino, Frank Harris, Ravel, Ezra Pound, Zadkine; and ten people in the Dog and Duck told me Nora had slept with Modigliani.

I first met Nora at the Dog and Duck. I was wandering through the streets of Soho looking in New World awe at the male whores in the pubs on Old Compton Street. Even Juvenal would have been awed. I walked into the Dog and Duck, a pub Buber mentioned visiting in 1937, and Nora smiled at me. And I thought, my God, she can't be a whore too. She wasn't. I gave Nora a pack of Camels and she advised me to drink dark beer instead of light beer. I ordered whisky for us instead. We sat in the Dog and Duck drinking whisky and Nora loved the flow of pound notes out of my GI pants and she told me stories that I didn't know whether to believe or to remember as thoroughly as I knew my serial number. I bought whisky for a lot of people who came up to Nora, people she introduced me to as "my great American friend." When the pub called time, Nora said, "Let's eat." And for the first time in London I entered a restaurant where the English ate. Nora took me blindfolded through the blackout to a restaurant she called the King's Balls. A big smoky restaurant with dirty table cloths and

jammed with more Lesbians, whores, faggots, and Wing Commanders than Krafft-Ebing had in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Nora ordered spaghetti. But she didn't eat. I think my age made her sad. She looked at her spaghetti as though her intestines had spilled open. The room roared with talk. I had to shout for Nora to hear me. Nora got up suddenly from the table and hurried into the ladies' room. Nora came back just as a whore stopped at the table to tell me that the price dropped to £5 after midnight.

"What did she want?" Nora asked me.

"Five pounds."

"For all night?"

"Just for two doorways."

Nora howled.

"Is that expensive for an American?" she asked.

"It's over \$20. You used to be able to buy twenty whores for \$20 in Alliance, Ohio."

"Alliance, Ohio. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Los Angeles, California. Portland, Oregon. In boarding school I memorized all of the forty-eight states. I had nothing to do one weekend in Devon. It rained and rained. I've never forgotten that, though. It's one of those silly accomplishments that remain with you. I used to astound all the Americans in Paris because none of them could name all of their forty-eight states, not even Sinclair Lewis. Isn't that an extraordinary thing? Isn't the King's Balls an extraordinary place? One bomb could do so much good by falling on it. This is the dirty part of London. London is far dirtier than Paris. You'll see. I like you and that's important for me. And I want to see you again. And I

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think it was no accident that you walked into the Dog and Duck. So walk me home now and let the floozies go."

We went into the blackout again. Out of the King's Balls. Nora held on to my arm. I started to take out my flashlight. "No," she said, "I know these streets, I know them too well." At the door of her house on Fitzroy Street Nora asked, "When do you come in again?"

"Every thirty days I get seventy-two hours. They can put me in the guardhouse if I take seventy-four hours."

"They," Nora said. "I know who They are. The Theys and the Wheys. Ta. Don't miss your one-o'clock train out of Liverpool Street." Nora leaned against me. She kissed me good night. I kissed her and in the instant I realized that I could actually go to bed with her.

I got into the Underground for the ride to the Dog and Duck and Nora's surprise. I carried my musette bag stuffed full of loot for Nora and the gas mask that was mandatory equipment before the guards permitted you to exit from the base. The Germans were also threatening gas. I couldn't understand why the Germans threatened another day of war. The Germans could have easily on this October day of the war said *genug* and declared their intent to start manufacturing the best can openers in the western world.

The Underground passed stations where the primordial blitz of 1940 still stood, buried people waking up on the Underground platforms, standing publicly in their winter underwear, gathering together blankets. I was an

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American soldier in a foreign land and I took out a pack of Wrigley's chewing gum and gave it to the little girl sitting next to me who would one day have to remember the war.

2

I came out of the Underground station at Tottenham Court Road and looked up to see the barrage balloons anchored in the London sky like sausages to attract the German bombers.

I avoided crossing over to Charing Cross Road and the book stalls and hurried to the Dog and Duck, where Nora was waiting.

The Dog and Duck was an old pub, not as old as the pubs on Fleet Street, but old enough for London and far enough away from Piccadilly not to attract the whores. The whores did their business in Piccadilly and Leicester Square, great swarms of them. I was certain there were more whores than chickens for sale in London. I didn't want a whore again. Though whores, as Boswell discovered, are wonderful when you walk the Strand depressed and suddenly you feel the need of pressing deeply into an unresisting body and dying quietly, with the reasonable assurance that you'll rise from your quick grave. The streets were black in Boswell's time and he had whores on street corners, on London Bridge, in alleyways, in doorways. London was black in my time and I had had whores in doorways, on Pall Mall, in the Strand, in Hyde Park, and even in Victoria Station.

The Dog and Duck was off a court, off Windmill

Street, two buildings away from a brothel of men that quietly did a consistent business with American colonels. Only colonels and up could afford the prices. The door of the Dog and Duck opened into a huge mirror plastered with medals of World War I, commonly known as the World War before World War II. High stools faced the mirror. A great stained-glass window took up the rear of the pub. The window was brown glass and the sunlight came through as a quiet reminder. Most of the people I had met in the pub had given up on the sun. They seemed to be waiting for a death that would at least promise them a decent eulogy. Some of the great ones did come into the pub. I had seen Augustus John. Orwell was very great to Nora. I was told George Barker was the greatest poet in England. I bought a poet named Thomas a double gin with Scotch whisky floating on top of the gin, and Nora said I should remember his name.

Nora waved to me from the bar. She wore her heavy tweed skirt, the jacket that matched, the beret I had never seen her remove. Nora smiled at me. Her teeth were bad. But her face had long lost its dependence on clean teeth and a perfectly formed nose. Her face was like yesterday's newspaper. Full of alarms and obituaries, of stories no one ever gets to know.

"I'm thirsty," she said.

Mr. Stewart the publican was ready with his only bottle of Scotch. Whisky, it's called in London.

"Cheers." Nora sipped her double whisky. "Now let me have a cigarette." I gave her a pack of Camels. "And a Hershey bar, you didn't forget?"

I produced five Hershey bars that I had picked up at the PX.

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"It's extraordinary," Nora said, "what they permit you to cart away from that base. It's more extraordinary that the Hershey bars have followed you from New York to England."

"It's part of a calculated plan to make the war seem natural."

"It's nobody's calculated plan. It is natural. It's perfectly natural that last night about 12:30 a German bomber dropped two bombs three blocks from Fitzroy Street. I was thrown out of bed. I sat on the floor for an instant and when the building didn't crumble, as had once happened to me, I thought I should make good use of my time and I got hold of my pot and took a decent pee that I emptied out of my window on my lovely civilization. And right under my window I saw one of your Yanks and one of my countrymen kissing each other. I went back into bed and remembered your letter and I managed to fall asleep thinking of gray warships plowing through the North Atlantic loaded down with Hershey bars. And for all that I have a surprise for you."

"What?"

"You wait and see. This is just the morning of your seventy-two-hour pass. Your passes, I keep thinking of periods."

Nora nodded to Mr. Stewart for a fresh whisky.* I asked Mr. Stewart to pour a whisky for Mrs. Poole, who sat in the public room. She came in every day with a magnifying glass and the *London Times*. She was 87. Her voice was garbled and I could never understand a word she said to me. Nora told me that Mrs. Poole used to whore in 1874 and then she married a publican who died of TB. She lived on his money until 1892, then she

returned to whoring. Mrs. Poole was famous because she was supposed to have slept with Guy de Maupassant. But the story has never been verified and de Maupassant had died in 1893.

Mrs. Poole lifted her whisky glass toward me and smiled. Nora told me, "A man still comes in here who slept with Mrs. Poole in 1900. He's the authority for her background. I like this living history. We should have an oral history of the world now that we have a complete anal history. You should hear Mr. Ellis describe his encounter with Mrs. Poole. 'I was coming up the Strand when this woman asked me if I knew the way to Museum Street. Of course I knew the way to Museum Street. I had been going there as a student. I said to her, Come along with me. We started walking and then she said, Would you like to stop? Stop off here? What for? I thought. I saw she was pointing to one of those shabby houses off the Strand. She smiled at me to explain the what for. A nice sort of smile, like a priest patting a child on its head. We went into the room and I emerged a rather good customer and since her profession builds up the least kind of annuity, I see to it that she doesn't regret the pleasure she must have given to a regiment of young men.' "

Nora got off the stool. "Let's go, two whiskies are enough for now. You can leave that bag with Mr. Stewart. I want to show you something very grand."

"The surprise?"

"That's later. This is just something very grand."

I liked walking with Nora on the London streets. I didn't feel like the GIs we were beginning to approach who roared up Shaftesbury Avenue. Shaftesbury Avenue

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was a solid mass of GIs and some of them looked at Nora as though she might be an extraordinary kind of whore. I know the whores on Shaftesbury looked at me as though I had made a bad purchase.

"They think I'm a floozie," Nora told me. "That's wonderful!"

Nora pointed toward Regent Street. "And even here. But these are those expensive floozies who live in the alleys of Shepherd's Market."

"You didn't tell me where we're going."

"Out of the Dog and Duck. I feel like some luxury this afternoon."

Nora led me into a high-ceilinged restaurant with red velvet banquettes along the walls and serving carts of silver-plated food warmers pulled by men in livery.

"Here will do."

Nora sat down on the red velvet and took off her beret. "This calls for gin."

The menu was in French and I could read *beefsteak*. Nora ordered chicken and a double gin with orange.

"At least a chicken you can recognize," Nora said. "I suppose there's no reason why wars should interfere with people eating. They never did before this one. And I think it's remarkable that we all lie down to sleep at night."

Nora drank the double gin and a second double gin. The tablecloth was stained, a reminder that tablecloths were difficult to launder in wartime.

"Now for a proper lunch. Chicken! My God, I thought they had stopped breeding."

Nora lifted the cover of the casserole. "This is slightly better than that sewer I took you to on Wardour Street."

That's a filthy place. There's a Lesbian in the ladies' there who takes anybody on for five shillings. I could never afford the treat, not even for five shillings. You should see London. Walk, walk, walk, walk. There's the British Museum. You needn't look at anything in the Museum, it's all nonsense, but it's enough to go tramping across that vast courtyard. If it's knowledge we want, there's plenty of it. But if it's chicken you want—" Nora cut into the chicken.

"I want to rent a room in London," I told Nora.

"What for? You can have my extra room if you want it. There's a bed in the front room. It has that wonderful view of the window on Fitzroy Street where the three Lesbians perform nightly like garden snakes. How much would you pay for a room?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is."

"Send me a pound note a week and let me know a week in advance when you are coming in and the front room will be reserved for you. It's yours and I can be certain of some money."

I didn't know where Nora got her money. She didn't work. She had no occupation. She was a painter. But at 53 you're no longer a painter unless you have an income. Sophie told me Nora had a fixed income of £2 a week. Nora told me Sophie had written two novels that didn't sell enough copies to provide the Dog and Duck with toilet paper for a week.

"I'll take the room."

"I think you should. I think it's time you stopped going to those Piccadilly hotels, particularly the way you describe them, with every chambermaid ready to raise her chamber pot. You need a room. What my friend

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Forster called a room with a view. And I don't mean of the three Lesbians. They're getting to be a bore and I pull my shade down on them. Send me the pound note. The view you'll find."

3

Buber got this letter on Nora, passed by Lieutenant Blau, who was no Captain Owens. Sirota told me that Blau rubber-stamped the letters but occasionally he would go to work on a letter neatly excising paragraphs. Sirota told me that Blau objected to all references that the war might end. I wrote Buber:

Nora almost vomited on the red velvet bench of the Café des Trois Frères. The waiter rushed up with a silverplated pail. Nora managed to keep the chicken in her. "This is what happens when you're not used to eating chicken in Burgundy sauce." The gin hit her, as gin can. I was ginned up myself. Nora tugged at my arm as though it would be possible to slide under the tablecloth and have sex. The 53 stopped me. I think that if I'm going to sleep with Nora it will have to happen more accidentally. Just by falling in bed on top of her. Nora isn't somebody you start out sleeping with. I got a taxi and we rode back to Nora's flat. Nora lives on the top floor and I practically had to carry her up the five flights. Her landlady looked at me as though I was nuts.

The landlady pushed her breasts out to show me that if I wanted to sleep with Nora, she at least was the better lay. Nora had told me going up the stairs that the landlady used to dance in music halls and she married a

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dentist who died of elephantiasis and he left her the building. Nora was completely out. I put her on the studio cot and then I went to sit by the open window that looked out on the glory of London. I can't take gin and I had to keep from vomiting. I could feel my legs buckling. I don't know how we both got so high except the man in livery always seemed to be ready with double gins. Nora had eaten her Burgundy chicken but flung it out the minute we hit the damp air of Regent Street. "My God! What a waste!" she cried, "A poor bird had to die for all this trouble." That was the last thing she said because she went out cold in the taxi.

I like Nora's room. It has the look of the painters' rooms I knew in New York, those \$16-a-month cold-water flats on Hudson Street. The clean brushes, the squashed tubes of paint, the raw canvases, the piled-up books, the raw hanging paintings, hanging like newborn babies on display in a maternity ward, the stretchers, the empty wine bottles, all of it looks so god damn elegant. Every painter's room I've ever been in always gives me that feeling of saying fuck you to the world, which is probably elegance. The john is in the hallway but Nora prefers to piss in a pan and dump the stuff down the drain. The front room has a big fireplace. Nora has the mirror over the fireplace plastered with photographs and letters from Shaw, Brzeska, Gide, Augustus John. There's a fabulous snapshot of Modigliani and he looks just like Modigliani of the legend except that the snapshot also shows him as human. I know Nora scored Modigliani and that story has been told to me by everybody I buy a drink at the Dog and Duck but I'm waiting for Nora to tell it. I'm writing so much about the room be-

cause this is the room that Nora agreed to rent to me and the beginning of her surprise.

I was happy to give Nora a pound a week. For three months now, since I've met Nora, I've been thinking of renting a room in London, or even outside of the air base. Some of the guys have already done it. There's a sergeant from Toledo in my Nissen hut who rented a legitimate thatched cottage near the perimeter of the base. He brought in a girl from London and established her in the cottage and he steals food for her from the mess hall. He gets laid every night and that makes him a hero on the base. The officers have threatened to break it up but so far nothing has happened. I thought a room in London might give me a sense of still being myself, whatever that means, but I feel the need for it and I like to go along with whatever I feel comes from inside that incredible part of me that is supposed to remain me throughout everything, including my recent promotion from private to pfc.

Nora snored. The *Thousand and One Nights* has a story about a girl who gets a cock and then doesn't know how to sit on her newly found balls. Nora has been running for a long time in a strictly man's world; there don't seem to be any women painters in London or Paris. The gin, the scoring from 19 to 53, her room, the way she walks covering large areas of the sidewalk, it's all a man's world, the world Henry Adams predicted or saw. But Nora never wanted to stop being a woman. She told me she was never head over heels, at least with a woman. In the room, knocked out from gin, she tugged at me, reaching for my fly, and it would have been simple to drop into bed with her and have a go, as Sophie says. Sophie

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scored me in about six minutes when she invited me up to her room on Percy Street when Nora had to take off from the Dog and Duck to see her lawyers on the Strand.

I write about Nora because I don't know anything about her. To know her would be maybe like knowing what the Mohammedans mean in their Koran. I sat by the window, actually respecting Nora's things, even though I felt like going through the papers scattered around the room that all looked as inviting as the documents I see marked TOP SECRET. I didn't pry, except to look at a note from Pascin where he said Nora had gorgeous nipples.

I sat by the window and watched London get black. The blackout is black. Sometimes the blackout gets you in the nuts. You get nervous when you can't even find Oxford Street and you want to cry out, *Lights! Lights! Lights!* I watched Fitzroy Street go black, the flashlights lighting the way into busy civilization. A torch in a doorway meant a whore lighting herself up for work. Nora told me that if she stood in a doorway and did five Yanks a night she would make more money than the Prime Minister.

Nora stirred just as the Dog and Duck stirred. She looked ash gray coming out of her sleep. But she smiled and said, "I didn't pee on the floor; that's when you develop incontinence, which is when we all become edible mushrooms. Let's go. And how do you like your room? Let me have the pound note now, I'll forget later."

I gave Nora a pound note, which she put into the pages of *Horizon*. Nora didn't want to eat. We went to the Duke for a whisky before going to the Dog and Duck. The Duke is a quiet pub, except it's 100 per cent homo-

sexual. I have the uneasy impression that about 60 per cent of the men in England are gay. Maybe it's just the 60 per cent I see. Every time Nora introduces me to a man he turns out to be gay. Even Wells.

Wells was drinking a water glass of gin. Wells has written three novels and he's a fighter pilot in the RAF. Before the war he had written only one novel and he had one of those curious literary reputations that must drive a writer mad; he was known only to his friends. Nora tells me his books sell, even during the war. I'm going to pick up one at Foyle's and have Wells autograph it for me, because I've never had a book autographed by the writer. Nora told me that Wells shot down eleven German bombers in 1940. That last line will probably be censored. Nora tells everyone that I'm a famous American writer, which is embarrassing because I've never written anything, but it seems to explain my presence in a lot of pubs that no American seems to have entered since Benjamin Franklin.

Wells did ask me about American writers. He said is Faulkner as bad as he is great and does Hemingway have a secret plan for ending the war? Nora invited Wells to the Dog and Duck but he quietly said that he had to catch a train at Charing Cross and the war seized us like a gust of wind. Nora told me on the way to the Dog and Duck that she hopes Wells doesn't die. He's one of the people worth saving, Nora said, him and the rest.

The sirens went off. The sirens echo and echo like a telephone call in the middle of the night. Nora didn't suggest taking shelter. "There's shelter enough in the Dog and Duck." We went into the Dog and Duck and Mr. Stewart sadly pointed to his last bottle of whisky. I

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got two double whiskies and we went over to the fireplace. "We'll wait here," Nora said; "the surprise will be in by 8:25."

"What's the surprise?" I asked Nora. "Just get a third double whisky and keep it by us." I got the whisky and Mr. Stewart gave me my musette bag. Sophie came up to us and began telling us a wild tale. "An American soldier stopped me on Windmill Street and he asked me if I knew anyone by the name of Mrs. Susan Oakes. I didn't know anyone by the name of Mrs. Susan Oakes and I told him so. Then he took hold of my hand and he said you look like Susan Oakes. I said I'm not Susan Oakes. He said Susan Oakes is everybody and he opened his pants and he said, Touch it quickly and you have £5." "What did you do?" Nora asked. "I touched it and he ran down Windmill Street laughing." Nora choked on her whisky. I got Sophie a double gin. Sophie proudly looked at herself as though the story had earned her the gin. Warren came up to buy Nora a whisky. Warren has known Nora for twenty-five years, going back to the Paris days. Warren told me that he has a job that keeps him in London. He defuses Germans bombs that fail to explode. "How's your city?" he asked me. "My God, what a shining target, not even the Boy Scouts could miss New York!" Warren's also gay. Nora told me that he's been living in Chelsea with the same boy friend for fifteen years and every year she expects him to get pregnant. I don't suppose it makes any difference what or who Warren prefers in bed once he settles over a one-ton bomb. Are we really killing one another twenty-four hours a day in an official war?

Nora noticed me and said, "Don't be impatient, the

surprise will be here." Is the surprise a girl? "Balls," Nora said, "I don't like you meeting floozies, you'll get the pox, you'd be better off paying the price for entry to my temple as the dirty French writers say." Wing Commander Johnson came into the Dog and Duck. He absolutely looks like an Englishman. What does an Englishman look like? The Englishmen I've seen who look like Englishmen look as though they're always standing in Victoria Station.

"The surprise!" Nora cried.

I looked up and saw a girl in a brown tweed coat pushing her way through the jam-up of people at the bar and coming toward Nora. I handed the double whisky to her. She sipped on the whisky and said, "Oh, this is good, this is good." "There's another one safely waiting for you," Nora told her; "we've provided grandly for you." The girl's name is Lenny, really Eleanor, she said. I immediately liked her face.

Lenny sipped on the double whisky. She knew she had come to the Dog and Duck to meet me and she fully appraised me with her remarkable eyes. I call them remarkable because they were the first pair of eyes of an Englishwoman under 50 I had seen up close that belonged wholly to the owner, and that looked at me, to see me. She loosened her coat. She saw my eyes go to her breasts when she loosened her coat.

"Lenny is from Cornwall," Nora told me, "and Cornwall is where you should go when your new captain gives you a ten-day furlough. And Paul," Nora told Lenny, "has Hershey bars in that magnificent green musette bag." I took out the Hershey bars and we ate them as hors d'oeuvres with the whisky. "This is so good, this is

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so good," Lenny said. I dug out the can opener at the bottom of my musette bag and opened a can of Dole's sliced pineapple.

And I'll write more about the Dole pineapple, Lenny, and Nora later. Right now I have to get off to the sack. I wanted to get this letter off to you because I'm beginning to feel for the first time that the war isn't completely interfering with me but I really don't know what that statement means, though I'm willing to find out, if the war doesn't interfere too much. Now that Captain Owens has been transferred to eternity I'm trying to get over the feeling that we're all as replaceable as the rubber tires stacked up in the motor pool. But between Lenny and Nora there is terrain.

4

I woke in the wet morning, the mist and chill of Suffolk, the secular cursing in the Nissen hut, the grim chemical chamber pots, emptied by equally grim Ipswich men, anxious to see the face of my new captain. We no longer stood roll call but went off to our job, the leveling of Germany. We were all already conditioned to war and didn't need the roll call or close-order drill to remind us that we had been temporarily separated from the human race.

If I got up early enough, I would walk down the muddy road to the runways and watch the B-17s circle over the base until they fell into formation, a flying human wedge, each plane loaded with bombs laboriously transported from the States and just as laboriously transported to Germany. The war was as thoroughly catalogued as Parke-Bernet. A manual existed for every warring activity but my job. I interviewed the combat men who returned from the fantastic missions and I wrote up their exploits for decorations. The job had been assigned to me and I took it like all the assignments given to me, as part of the plan to end the war.

The air base was two miles from an English village that had gone quietly from the Stone Age into black-

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marketing Chesterfield cigarettes and whoring its daughters.

I don't suppose there was ever an army in history that was as determined to be normal as the Eighth Air Force, unless it was Caesar's legions. I saw the Fortress pilots climb into the B-17s as though they were entering a commuting train at Penn Station. The gunners I could never grasp. Their job was to fire the 50-caliber machine guns at the attacking German fighters with a remembered skill from penny arcades. They often did shoot down German planes. Though I never knew how they established their claims except that the word of the pilot was usually taken and an Air Medal was issued for each fallen German plane. I would have given them bushels of Air Medals. For the gunners climbed into the Fortresses with a faith in survival that ought to have proselytized the Germans into peace.

"Don't you salute?"

And there was my new captain, the censor, in front of me. I was looking up at the flares in the cold November sky, the flares that signaled the planes toward Europe.

I threw the captain a training-base salute and walked into the headquarters building to write a letter that I thought might return the captain and me to the forgetful human race.

5

What was a letter? Maybe a billion letters were written each week by the troops of the Allied Command, the Red Army, the German Reichswehr and the Japanese. Even the Germans still made stamps. The letters were sacrificial lambs. Here was the Yang. The I and Thou. The wheel. The letters were like a billion candles in the immense sky we have built for ourselves. Lasker was in our group. He couldn't read or write. How he stayed in our group I didn't know. But he could repair B-17s. I read his letters from Charlestown and wrote his letters to Charlestown. He wept every time I read a letter aloud for him. And every time I wrote a letter for him he went off into his sack and buried himself under a pile of blankets like a man in a fever. The letters were his only obvious religion. "I don't know how I got here," Lasker told me to write, "and there's no going back now, is there?"

Sirota banged into the Nissen hut in the combat boots he managed to secure from the quartermaster sergeant for the sweet promise of more efficient mail service. He even managed to lay his hands on a Nazi SS dagger brought back to England by a gunner who made the miraculous escape from Occupied Europe.

"Personal delivery," Sirota told me, "there's always

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personal delivery for a shack-up." Shack-up, if you don't have a dictionary of American slang, means to have sexual relations, generally on a temporary and saturated basis.

I knew Nora's hurried handwriting, the slanted lines of high English, the high note of urgency, the arrangement. Her letters to me were always for an arrangement, a plan. Wing Commander Johnson told me Nora had been one of the great arrangers in Paris. He said she could have made a fortune as a madam.

Nora wrote exactly what I wanted to read: "Lenny likes you and asked when you're coming in and I explained your system of passes. Congratulations, my dear, because Lenny is one of the nicer people who has walked into the Dog and Duck. But that doesn't mean you're to give up your room. You forgot your pound note this week, so please put it in the mail."

The letter from Nora was part of the billion candles mailed each week, a small sampling of which Sirota began to sort on his desk in the Nissen hut. The letters were always read again and again as though any one of the billion letters might find a way out of the labyrinth that extended from the North Sea to the islands of the Pacific, the war there described by Lasker as two men battling with sledge hammers in a Georgia swamp.

I had grown up and was still growing up between World War I and World War II, the curious period in history when war was described as waste and ads appeared in all the magazines saying that one battleship could provide free lunches for fifty million school children for fifty million years. I had come into the war quietly, though my legs kept telling me to flee down

Lexington Avenue. And once in the Army I was like a fly in a catsup bottle. But what an extraordinary army. It parted ten Red Seas and outdid the Caesars in building a bridge of boats across the Atlantic. Overnight it made it possible for millions of women to enter into their legitimate profession of whoring. It sent men flying into the air like trained hawks. It placed men in fox-holes that a fox wouldn't sit in, it put men in tanks, submarines, bombers, fighters, and managed to convince roughly twelve million men to eat a breakfast of shit on a shingle.

I was, to tell the truth, a great American nobody, a writer who had never published except for one lucky story that Buber read in New York and he said the story had a voice and I still hear his comment ringing in my ears.

I kept a copy of *Moby Dick* in my field locker. I read *Moby Dick* when I was fourteen, quickly, as though to prove I could do it. I read it again on the deck of the troop ship the *Mauretania*, that entered the Atlantic alone, as Melville had entered the sea of words. The letters were my *Moby Dick*. I could drop to any depth. Who would know it but Buber, my new captain, and myself? I looked away from myself, that terrain that will follow us to the moon, to the L. C. Smith typewriter. The carriage held a follow-up letter to Buber on my meeting with Lenny and Nora's room:

Nora told me in the Dog and Duck that I should come home with her when Mr. Stewart started calling time. I could see Lenny give me a funny look. Of why do you have to do that? Or didn't you do that already? Nora picked up on Lenny's look. "He's my lodger, my dear," she told Lenny, "and I don't want him locked out so

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that he goes to bed with a floozie and gives half the American Army the pox." "I rented Nora's room," I told Lenny. "For a pound a week," Nora said, "which makes me a wartime speculator." Mr. Stewart kept calling time. I had hoped Lenny would suggest that I go home with her. But as Mr. Stewart continued the ancient cry of *Time, ladies and gentlemen*, Lenny told me in five swift sentences that she was married, that her husband was going to pick her up on Oxford Street, that her husband was an illustrator, that she would like to see me again, and she gave me an address on Holborn that she said would be all right to use if I wrote. She went out of the Dog and Duck and I felt she had given me the one look into the future that I had had since I marched into the hold of the *Mauretania* off the coast of New Jersey.

I left with Nora. The outside street was black. We bumped into Albert Leming just as Nora started to tell me that I should buy a *Horizon* with Leming's story in it. "My fucking thing's out," he told Nora, showing us his dead flashlight. "I think we're becoming a nation of cockholders, at least we're beginning to hold the true light. Does your thing work?" Leming asked me. "As an American you should have an extra battery in your pocket. I'll break my neck trying to get into my house without a light." "We'll take you," Nora said. "Good, and the American, can't you get this war over with?"

We went into Leming's building off Fitzroy Street, a damp building, next to a shattered house, up a flight of stairs that didn't seem to end, past a girl who came out of the third-floor flat looking as though we had surprised her, up to Leming's apartment. He didn't open

the door with a key but merely leaned against the door and softly pushed it open. He went to the window and dropped the hanging blanket across the window. "Now we can have some light." He lit two candles on a table that looked as though it was covered with rat turds. "I have one bottle of Marsala. I had some bread and things but they're gone." He looked toward the wall where I could hear the mice chewing on the bread. Leming smiled at me when I looked toward the wall. "The wine is good enough, if you don't mind the glasses."

Leming poured the wine without bothering to rinse the glasses. "You're not antiseptic?" Leming asked me. "You don't stand a chance if you are; the bugs outnumber us by at least thirty billion to one." Leming tossed me a magazine from the mantel. "You can keep this," he said; "don't look at it now, but later. It's always clumsy to give somebody something to read that you've written; it's like asking a stranger to scratch your balls." Leming has a good head, like the head on a beat-up Roman coin I bought on Petticoat Lane. He's older than me. But everyone I meet in London is older than me. Leming told me that his passion is to write books that everybody will read. He said he knows he can write books that nobody will read.

Nora waited until the Marsala was emptied and then she stood up to say that we had to go. Leming quickly looked toward his bed, a sagging cot, as though there was room for him and me, and then I knew he was gay.

On the black street with the massive London flats looking blacker against the black sky, Nora held on to my arm, telling me, "Leming never eats but he stays fat. I think it's because he only eats bread and jam. He's

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one of those men Oxford flung up. I remember when he came into the Dog and Duck for the first time, shy, but a little bold, not knowing how to be bold, and then in three months he was standing at the bar shouting and singing and picking up little boys that he devoured like a toad. But he writes beautifully, ordinary words that ring just when you want them to ring. London, London is too full of men who devour little boys. Did you see the way he looked at you? Don't let him get you, then he'll ignore you and he's good to know; he'll be one of the great ones if that pack of rats in his room don't break through the walls and devour him in his sleep." "How come he's not in the Army?" I asked Nora. "He was, but they shot him in the leg with something."

We stopped in front of Nora's house.

"Let's go, lodger."

And then we began the ascent. Nora changed the instant we got inside her building. She became a woman and not some name out of the past going in and out of pubs like a newsboy trying to sell yesterday's newspaper. She held on to my arm and rubbed herself against me. She made a sound like a cat when her breasts came into contact with my arm. She wasn't high from the Marsala but I felt dizzy from the whisky, the beer and wine, and I hadn't eaten. I wanted to go to the Syrian restaurant but Nora said they only served dog meat after 11 o'clock. The landlady didn't come out on the landing. Her door was locked, the light out. She must have found somebody who still wanted in. Nora opened her coat. "I can't stand wine," she told me, "and I can't stand Lem-ing, he's an awful faggot. I don't know what they do to each other that could be so interesting. I've always tried

to imagine Leming in bed with a boy but I can't get any further than seeing him slobbering like an old lady eating a bowl of soup but I thought you should see his place, it's one building the bombs always miss. There wasn't a siren tonight?" Nora was holding onto my hand, her hand going in and out of my fingers. "Oh God," Nora said, "how high up do I live?" I went to the window and dropped the blackout curtain. "Which bed do you want?" Nora asked. "You might as well be in my bed tonight." Nora didn't wait for a confirmation. She went into the hallway. I found the light switch with my flashlight. On the mirror I saw a drawing of Lenny, put there since I had last been in the room. It was a pencil sketch, in red pencil, a good authentic drawing, and Lenny looked the way I liked her to look. Nora saw me looking at the drawing. "You can have that, my dear, for £3/10." I said it was a deal. "Then I'll sign it." Nora signed her name and dated the drawing. "Give me the money in the morning, I'll forget where I put it now." I lit the gas burner and I was wondering if I should sleep with Nora. I counted the years and saw that she was more than thirty years older than me and I was in no position to know what thirty years meant, except it seemed something like the ocean I had crossed. I couldn't see myself making all the preliminaries. And I didn't know at what age women stopped being women, if ever. And even if Nora was thirty years older than me, that only meant she was 53 and that wasn't old, not as old as a woman can be. And maybe there wasn't any age ever. The Army does it to you. Surrounded by so many bodies. You wonder what the hell each body is. Who is Lasker? And who is Sirota? And the new Captain Reese?

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And my dead Captain Owens? And the twenty guys in my Nissen hut? I haven't written yet about Golden. He's gay. He almost got thrown out of the Army in Oklahoma but now he's a staff sergeant. He took me to a pub in Ipswich where everybody in the pub was gay and some son of a bitch got into the revolving door with Golden and started kissing him. Nora asked me what I was thinking about. I said I was thinking about Leming lying down to sleep. Nora said, "Do you know how many people are sleeping in London tonight?" "Six million," I said, "eight million." "Leming is one of them," Nora said. "Come on, Paul, there's a simple pleasure Leming won't ever know." And Nora made the decision for me.

I signed my name to Buber's letter and typed a note to Nora, enclosing £2 for the rent to the end of November and £3/10 for the drawing of Lenny.

The war hadn't ended during the night. Every morning that I woke I expected the war to be over. The great gray Nissen huts would have to vanish from the English countryside. The Nissen huts were ugly. They were like great garbage cans cut in half, flung down for men to live in. I am always amazed by the places we live in. But I think it is a way we have of circumventing the fact that we are alive and alive this day, all of us. I spent the morning in the Army talking to the chaplain, Captain Ross. He was busy folding up the instruments of his trade for a trip to Ipswich. The chaplain was a nice man. He didn't make the mistake of taking himself too seriously and the men in the Nissen huts would go down to him on Sunday morning just as they go into a pub. To kill time. Which is a phrase I want to analyze one day.

All of us were part of that new army of men who never see the people they kill.

I couldn't explain the presence of the chaplains in the Air Force. Our base had four squadrons of combat B-17s. The planes went out daily, weather permitting, with the blessings of the various chaplains. I never heard one of the chaplains protest the bombings. It would have been a great sight to see Captain Ross running down the runway after one of the B-17s, yelling into the

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tail wind, “Stop! stop!” Would the plane have stopped if the chaplain had run down the runway yelling into the tail wind? I don’t know. I only know that the chaplain never tried to hold back a B-17 from rising off the ground with its tons of bombs.

* Sirota left three letters on my cot. A V-letter from Buber; a postcard from Nora with a picture on it by Tiziano Vecellio-La Maddalena-R. Galleria Pitti-Firenze, a fat lady with two round naked breasts; and a dazzling letter from Lenny.

Buber wrote: Your last letter was cut into ribbons and I've framed it and it's now on the wall of this miserable hotel room I've rented for myself. I try to convince myself that this is a part of old New York just because I think I need some tradition at this stage of the game in New York. I have a ceiling twenty feet high and a bathroom big enough to float a PT boat. I started an affair with a Westchester matron who likes my pieces in *The Review* and I must confess I like her piece. She's a juicy bitch and her eyes light up every time she talks about the death of her husband. If I had the strength I'd write a piece about the rejuvenation of American women on the death of their husbands. Your censor got into the paragraphs about Nora and Leming. I know something about Leming. He has a reputation for virgins, which is enough to make him famous. I heard this from an English girl at the office. I showed her your letter and she said, "My God, the English seem to be enjoying the war as much as the Americans."

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Nora wrote: My landlady threatened to evict me because I emptied a pot on her head when she stood on the steps but it's all better now and we're friends again. Leming took me to Sadler's Wells. I think he's after you. A big bomb fell near Lenny's building and she spent the night at my place. She asked me all kinds of questions about you and I answered none of them. I gave her a tin of pineapple and felt as though I was doling out a dukedom. Murdi who I want you to meet wanted to treat me to a Bombay chicken in Dean Street but I told him no thank you. Augustus John invited me to a party on the 12th and I'll need a new blouse to wear with this suit that I've been wearing longer than most goats wear their whiskers. So please send me two weeks' rent in advance so I can shop at Harrod's. I haven't bought anything at Harrod's since 1919, the year I sold six drawings, two oils, and a sketch Jacob Epstein had the good sense to buy. What do you think of Italy? It's the best news since Napoleon started for Moscow. It occurred to me that you ought to have an oil adorning your Nissen hut so when you come in again I'll give you the choice of three to pick from, for a price, and maybe I'll have Lenny's oil done by then. I like Lenny sitting for me. She sits much better than I used to. I was always nervous and felt like a native when you point a camera at them. What it all means I don't know, but it's nice that the sun is shining today.

Lenny wrote: Of course we can meet for lunch. I would love it. Nora told me about her experience with the Burgundy chicken. I think we ought to start out with a restaurant I know on Montague Street, it's an ancient place near the Museum and the food is no more distin-

guished than the draft beer but all kinds of famous people quietly sit there and nobody knows they're really famous. I hope there'll be some names for me to point out to you. It's always nice to stare at famous people, they always give me the special feeling of existence. Nora gave me a tin of Dole's pineapple and when I brought it home Robert yelled that I had finally taken to sleeping with Yanks. We had a terrible row. But he ate the pineapple. I'm sitting for Nora some evenings. She gives me 2/6 an hour which she can't afford but it gives her the busy sense of being busy. Nora is a marvelous portraitist, probably the best in London right now, if only she would work at it. I don't know what Nora needs to bring her around. She's fond of you. Americans are supposed to have a wonderful sense of the practical, so perhaps you can see a way out for Nora. Court painter to the American Army, or something. Let's make it definite and we'll meet at the Three Nuns for lunch at about 12:30 on the 18th. I always dislike making plans in advance because of the bombs, but bombs withstanding, etc., let's meet on the 18th. Please don't bring me any tins of Dole's, as much as I would like it. Then Robert will surely think I've joined the London ranks. I like what you said about America, Mexico, the war, but mostly I like the fact that you saw Nora. She's done a wonderful job of obscuring herself but then we're all pretty well accomplished at that feat.

8

I treated myself to a haircut on Regent Street and walked from Piccadilly to the Three Nuns on Montague Street. At Rainbow Corner, a corner temporarily more famous than Hyde Park Corner, the GIs took over the sidewalk like the garment workers on Seventh Avenue. They stared at the whores and the whores stared back at the GIs. The haggling was wonderful. And the whores carried off the GIs like the daughters of Leucippus. Rainbow Corner existed as a counting house, providing ping-pong tables, theater tickets, train schedules, messages, coffee, the omnipresent doughnut, and the great invention of the war, hostesses, all of it available for the price of a uniform.

The Three Nuns looked as solid and ancient as a wine barrel. I ordered two gins and waited for Lenny. I sat facing Montague Street, looking out into the exterior of London that had miraculously escaped the bombs. I wanted to see Lenny come through the door, to see if I remembered Lenny as I had reconstructed her for the past thirty days.

Out of the windows of the Three Nuns, in the gray sky, always wanting to rain and occasionally blessed with a brilliant sun I saw two decoys hovering, barrage balloons, held by swaying cables of steel, cables powerful

enough to shear the German bombers. The decoys swayed, fat and menacing, probably the most extraordinary toy of war since the Chinese dragon. They made London look unreal. I always expected the island to be lifted into the depth of the sky and dumped into the Red Sea. And the swaying cables, the fat silvery balloons framed in the window of the Three Nuns, made me want to pull away from the bar stool, to wait above the earth until all the mysteries would come tumbling like clowns out of the secret caves that must be somewhere.

"Cheers!"

I turned to see Lenny. I didn't have to reconstruct her. There she stood, as I wanted her to be, taking up the drink I had ready for her, looking exactly as I had seen her for the past thirty days, her face open with her eyes on me. I loved the clarity of her face; nothing was hidden, yet it seemed everything was waiting to be discovered.

"I came through the family entrance and watched you staring up at our London sky. London isn't built to the scale of the sky, is it? New York must be. It's probably the only city in the world that looks right against the sky. C'mon, let's get a table near someone famous."

Lenny took her drink and led me to a very white starched tablecloth. The menu was a slate board. Only beef and fish were on the menu.

"Is anybody famous around us?" I asked Lenny.

"Just that man with a beard and the *Observer*. But he wouldn't be famous to you, he's English famous."

"What does he do?"

"He spends most of his life in the British Museum. He's probably the world's leading authority on Roman coins."

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Lenny wore a brown cashmere sweater, a tweed skirt. The cashmere was good for her body, it clung to her breasts, and again she saw my eyes go to her breasts.

"I have only an hour for lunch from Stillman and Lewis, literary agents. I just wish they were as exacting about their writers as they are about their lunch hours. But all literary agencies, like all publishing firms, are queer. Probably because they have a hold on the mystery of things."

"What do you do for Stillman and Lewis?"

"Nothing too much in publishing. I just work, work, work, mostly when Robert isn't working, which is right now. I answer correspondence. The best letters come from authors who've never made any money. I can't imagine why people think they can make money out of writing. I don't think ten of our authors make a year what I get paid for typing letters to them. You know Nora wrote a book."

"A novel?"

"Yes, and she expected to make a fortune on it. It came out in 1937. She thought it would sell and sell, particularly if she described her defloration night. She put it all down in the book, down to the last bloody sheet. But the book never sold. Her friends read it for private jokes. Two men from Fitzroy Square tried to sue her for libel because she described them being as impotent as a cucumber. But the libel suits never attracted any attention. Stillman and Lewis say they don't know what makes a book sell, except that it must make a decent hospital present and it mustn't frighten middle-aged women into remembering they're either middle-aged or alive. The worst offense is to remind the reader

he's alive. The reader must always hope, hope to be only as alive as the next person, otherwise you frighten the hell out of him. And the reader's instinct is frightening in these matters. And now let's order. I have to eat within an hour. It's a rule Stillman and Lewis sticks by to help them into remembering that there's not a war going on. In the first days of the war they had an image of the German hordes crossing the Channel and burning all the libraries to the ground with the publishers going first."

We ate quickly to help Stillman and Lewis remember there wasn't a war going on. I still found it hard to believe that in all of London work was going on, work that wasn't war.

"Can I still get Nora's book?"

"You can probably find a copy on Charing Cross Road for a twopence. Nora's not a writer but the book does hold up. She's a painter and an excellent painter. She said she wrote the book because a lot of other idiots were writing books. But I understand she wrote the book out of desperation, to get the recognition that only money seems to be able to give us after the age of forty. I can imagine the horror of Nora's forties."

We walked out of the Three Nuns into the shadow of the British Museum. Clouds hid the barrage balloons. I completely forgot Lenny was married until I offered her two packs of Camels.

"I can't take them. Robert will be yelling that I'm really sleeping with Yanks in doorways. But they're too great a prize to give up. I'll smoke them at Stillman and Lewis."

"What time do you quit work?"

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"Five, five thirty. I like to leave after the official leaving hour, then I don't feel I'm working. Robert generally picks me up or we meet at the Duke of York."

"Is he picking you up tonight?"

"He said he would."

"Can you ask him not to?"

"I'd have to give him a good reason."

"Shopping. Aren't the shops open in London at night like Macy's and Gimbel's?"

"I haven't shopped for anything since 1941."

"Where would you go if you weren't meeting him?"

"Go to Nora's. The Dog and Duck. Walk. I like the London streets now in the blackout. They're so strange and so immediately historical. It's so much like walking through the British Museum just before they close the big doors, when the corridors are silent and the lights are beginning to go out and the objects fall into the walls. Maybe we could do that together one night. Just walk over the black and bloody body of London. I keep thinking that this is the way the sky and the city must have looked a thousand years ago. We're really savages for taking all this. For being so proud of surviving the blitz. Survival is never an alternative. I suspect life only comes up with a little meaning when you have alternatives. The sad people I've seen feel they've completely run out of alternatives."

Lenny led me into Red Lion Square but there was no time to sit on the benches. The gray sky began to whiten as though snow and not rain would fall. Two fighter planes roared high above the barrage balloons. I wanted desperately to take Lenny's hand and hold it as we walked but I didn't reach the extra three inches to take

hold of her hand.

"What can you tell him?" I asked Lenny.

"I think the truth."

"Would he like that?"

"I don't mean the truth that I'm going out with an American soldier. That would cause a worse row than the tin of pineapple. I mean just the truth that I want to go out."

"What does he do?"

"Robert paints, which means that he doesn't do much for money right now. He's a good illustrator only he works at it when we're really short of money. Which is generally always. It seems so strange to be short of money now, during the war, particularly when there's so much of it around. But Robert won't do war work, nothing he says that makes money out of the war. He said he was lucky to get out of the war with a couple of pieces of metal in his leg. He got wounded fighting in Africa. What a strange place to fight a war."

"England has objectors, or don't they?"

"Robert wouldn't have been an objector for religious or moral grounds. He likes to say that we have no religion or morals in the twentieth century. But of course we do. And in the beginning he had no objection to getting rid of Hitler. He went around like most people, calling Hitler a nasty little man. But that nasty little man owns more European countries now than I own hairpins. The war's so strange to me now. Right now as we walk it's going on. I've had four years of it. Two of my cousins were shot down in France, one cousin was killed at sea, I have an uncle who was blinded when a bomb hit his row of flats. I was buried once during the

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blitz, a story I can't tell anyone because too many people were buried themselves. Nobody talks now about the end of the war. I think we're beginning to enjoy it now. There's a pleasure and joy in war I can't grasp. I can't understand why everyone in London looks so full of life, it's almost as though we get our strength sopping up the blood of the ones who've been killed. Max Beerbohm would say, Don't despair, it's only a period in history. There, now you know a little of what I think and this is where I work."

Lenny pointed to the sooted plaque of Stillman and Lewis hammered into ancient Bloomsbury stone, and above Stillman and Lewis were five more plaques, all of them publishers, all of them charged in Lenny's wonderful phrase with a hold on the mystery of things.

"Where will I meet you?" I asked Lenny.

"I'll come to the Dog and Duck."

"Can't I pick you up here?"

"No. Robert might stop by and he'll want to have dinner out with me. I'm not much on cooking when I'm working. The Dog and Duck is the least likely pub for Robert to go into. He doesn't like it. Probably because it is one of the best of its kind of pub. Now you've got me talking too much about Robert. Don't let me. The life between a husband and wife is too tangled for any third person to listen to with any kind of comprehension. Gossip is fun. But the rest makes no sense. Nora always puts me down. A husband, Nora says, is a man you can either sleep with or not. I've got to go now. Maybe later tonight we'll walk around London on the fat belly of the mystery of things. That's a phrase Stillman and Lewis would like."

Lenny took my hand, closing her fingers over my hand, holding my hand in the grasp only a woman can give, the incredible bodily warmth that burns in us and that makes seeds of us all.

"Where do you go now?" Lenny asked. She tilted her head toward the body of London, the city that ended like all other cities, where the grass and earth began. "Why don't you take the No. 15 bus to the end, into Whitechapel, Limehouse, the East India Dock Road? Those are the neighborhoods I used to wander in when I first came to London to see London. The Dog and Duck will be open when you're back."

Lenny went into Stillman and Lewis, literary agents. I stood in front of the edifice, for it was an edifice, burdened with the doodads of the nineteenth century, blackened by the London soot and sun, rising as all the London buildings rose, like a citadel to protect the secrets of the trade. Lenny's quick turn into the citadel left me alone on the pavement, reminding me that I was a soldier again for the next five hours.

I walked from High Holborn to Trafalgar Square, over the sandbagged body of London, the streets like the floors of Westminster Abbey, covered with plaques, brass plates, history, that remarkable invention of mankind.

I boarded the No. 15 bus in Trafalgar Square and rode past the Strand, Fleet Street, looking out of the double-decker windows at the city. A bomb had not yet been invented that could reduce London to a charred cinder.

On Commerical Road I walked into the York. The women were drunk, the men looked buried upright into their mackintoshes.

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I asked for a whisky.

"You can only have three," the publican told me.
"That's the rule, afford it or not."

A whore about 50, out of Macbeth's pot, her fingernails broken, her hair coiled like a ragged piece of fur, in clothes that looked as though they hadn't been removed since 1919, asked me for a whisky.

I bought her a whisky that she swallowed like a steak.

I opened a pack of Camels and they vanished before the flock of pigeons in peaked caps.

The whore asked for a second whisky.

"The pox," whispered a dock worker in a muffler that would accompany him to his grave, "the pox, be careful of the pox."

"You pig!" cried the whore.

"Pig yourself!"

"The Germans cut your dick off!"

"Your tits wouldn't make soup!"

"Pig!"

"Hold off!"

"Pig!"

"Pox, pox!"

"I'll fuck that bloody American right on the top of this bar with my ass sticking in your face!"

"Pox, pox!"

"Hold it off!"

"Let the American decide!"

"No, I don't want to fuck any more," the whore said.
"No," she said, quietly fluted, holding back the circle of dock workers, "now it's tomorrow already and so will today be, this is the way of things, we don't need an American in this pub to remind us that we hate one

another. All of you, go home and fuck your wives to bloody death." The dock workers backed away from the whore as though a midafternoon ballet had been staged for me on Commercial Road.

A siren sounded as I walked out of the York. A quick alert like the bark of a dog. I didn't take cover. I waited for the No. 15 bus and when it came I climbed up the spiral staircase to sit down again in front of the double-decker windows. This time I didn't see London in the glass. I saw my face as sharp as the photos of bomb strikes from 10,000 feet. What did I really see in the No. 15 glass? What do we know of ourselves? Nothing except that we want to live forever. And that is just what life does for us, it lets us live forever while we live. I was anxious to be back in the West End of London, the Dog and Duck, to see Lenny, and to take her to bed if we could find a bed that wasn't occupied by her husband.

I got off and walked up Coventry Street, past the growing swarms of whores, the whores forming a solid column of bodies that stretched the length of Coventry Street, spilling over into Leicester Square, Shaftesbury, and of course, Piccadilly Circus. And in the darkening plain of the London sky, all of us, the whores, the uniforms of a dozen conquered European countries with the crazy flapping capes of the Free French, the Yanks being patiently fed and fattened for the Invasion, all of us, all of us sunk into the blackout.

I fled toward the Dog and Duck. Nora saw me enter the pub. She hurried toward me, kissing me full on my mouth and saying, "Lenny will have to wait, my dear, until I've made good use of you."

9

Nora led me past Sophie, past Wing Commander Johnson, past the pubbed-up whiskied bodies piled at the door of the Dog and Duck, past Leming, who stood limply caressing the back of an RAF neck, toward Murdi. Everybody looked nearly drunk but Murdi was drunk. I had heard about Murdi. He was a brilliant editor. A brilliant painter. A brilliant son of a bitch. A brilliant drunk. Murdi was from Aqaba, still believing in the cradle of civilization, the coo coo of babies and the rest of it, Nora told me, the rest neatly summed up in the initials F.S.P.C. I had seen Murdi coming in and out of the Dog and Duck, always in white duck pants, a long black jacket tightly buttoned up to his neck like the Indians of Bombay; held in awe, because he could give reality to language by putting it on a printed page.

"Nora, you bugger, what are you up to now!"

"An American, Murdi, my great American friend."

Murdi took my hand, holding it firm, not letting go, smiling, as though he had tried everything else.

"Let me buy you a drink, Pfc., and then we'll see."

Murdi put a pound note on the bar and Mr. Stewart generously gave us three double whiskies.

"It's silly to wait for the ration to run out," Murdi said. "Why don't the Americans send bourbon to Eng-

land and make this bloody war more comfortable? I am for the bourbonization of the world instead of the Coca-colazation of the world. Nora, what are you for? It's all so silly. And it would be if the Germans settled down to real buggery. Where are the München Germans of 1927? I expected them long ago to cut off Hitler's balls instead of sucking on them like lollipops."

I put a pound note on the bar and Mr. Stewart gave us three more double whiskies from the rationed White Horse and I asked him to fill a glass for Lenny.

Nora noticed the fourth glass. She leaned against me, whispering in my ear, "If you look around you, there at the bar, away from Murdi, in the brown scarf, you'll see Lenny's husband, Robert."

I turned, almost frightened, to look at Lenny's husband. I had no experience with husbands. He was drinking beer, standing with his taut back to the bar. He wore a heavy Harris tweed jacket, patched at the elbows, a brown scarf wound around his neck. He played with the ends of the scarf. He spoke to no one. He stared at the door. His face was lean, brooding, he looked in exile. He finished his beer and walked past me, brushing into me, and Nora smiled. He nodded stiffly to Nora and walked out of the pub, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jacket, as though daring the blackout to pitch him over.

"Well," Nora said, "I think you'll have to meet the two of them together so there won't be any confusion. You had lunch with Lenny."

"Yes, she's supposed to be here later."

"Lenny will come if she can. She must have told Robert something or he wouldn't have been here. I

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would save her whisky. There it is!"

The door of the Dog and Duck opened on the alert, shrill, blasting, bounding, haunting in its familiarity. The alert caused Murdi to spill his whisky. But the alert didn't stir the pub. It was too early in the evening for the German bombers and too late now in the war for them to do anything but haphazardly kill. But they were en route. The sirens bounding down all of the streets of London made it quite clear. I saw Leming brush his mouth against the ear of the RAF corporal and then suddenly stick his tongue into the corporal's ear.

"Nora, hello!"

An Englishman, tall, thin, quickly introduced as Dunn, gave me his cold wet hand to shake, picked up two bottles of ale and went to sit at Mrs. Poole's table, almost picking up Lenny's whisky, but Nora stopped him.

"Who is he?" I asked Nora.

"Right now he's trying to write the life of our friend Mrs. Poole, and he feeds her ale when he can afford it."

"He is," Murdi said, "Alfred Dunn, the worst writer in the British Empire. He sent me his first story in 1919 and I've been rejecting him more regularly than the Foreign Office. His last story was about a floozie who comes face to face with her father in a Kensington brothel. I might have published the story if the idiot whore had taken off her knickers for her father and given him a family rate. But she ran out of the brothel, presumably to jump into the North Sea. I might have still published the story if the father had then turned to another floozie in the brothel to complete his original business. Now when I get a story like this I always like to say to myself, Why

did the fool write this story? And I have come to the conclusion that the fools who write defy analysis. Then whom do we analyze? Always the second-rate writers. Only they permit analysis. Because only they use the same language as their critics."

Murdi smiled, spilling his whisky, his terrible smile, that I now began to see was the grimace of a caged orangutan. "Oh, my God! Now I'm talking nonsense when there's no need to. I think it's the bloody siren. I hate the silly thing. Birds don't try to escape from their songs. But why should birds be limited to a single song? Do fish get erections? I think it's extraordinary the way ladies become pregnant. It's all very mysterious and the sirens make it more mysterious. What if Ulysses had to listen to these sirens? How far would he go?"

I saw Murdi's teeth were very white and his black skin didn't announce its color because the color had completely merged, which is what color is supposed to do. Murdi was trying to shout above the ringing of the siren that now swiftly changed into a deadly overhead alert.

"There's a religion in India, or was," Murdi said above the sirens, "where the widow sits and watches the burning ashes of her husband and she has to bugger any stranger who comes to the burning burial pile. Why? I must lend you my copy of the *Kama Sutra* with the proper dirty pictures. You can't buy it in London. There you will read a description of the manner in which a lady should kiss a man's penis. Can you imagine having to write that down? Why? I puzzled over that question all through my teens and I have yet to meet a woman who kissed my penis who has read the *Kama Sutra*."

Murdi took Lenny's double whisky from the bar,

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drinking it down. I looked at the door, toward the drunken pub crowd that began to stir now the alert sounded. Lenny was in the blackout, the alert, unless she had run into her husband in the blackout and they went home. What could she tell him? I want to go to the Dog and Duck to meet an American soldier Nora introduced me to. He could say, because of the marriage contract, let's go home, I'm tired, or I didn't eat supper, or let's go to the Duke of York, or let's go to bed and take Lenny to bed, as a husband does, quickly, expecting a response and not really disturbed if it doesn't come. For that kind of response in marriage must be like playing a slot machine. I wasn't married. But I could guess what it meant to be married. Marriage must be, I guessed, having somebody to talk to. Murdi would never talk the way he did at the bar of the Dog and Duck to a wife if he had a wife. And Nora. Nora was telling Murdi in incredible detail how she vomited the Burgundy chicken into Regent Street.

"It was the chicken, not you, Nora. You musn't eat that kind of stewed chicken. It would make anyone ill. I must take you to Wardour Street. They make a chicken burnt to a crisp. Nobody dares to burn a chicken to a crisp, though we think nothing of doing it to humans. We treat chickens too tenderly. The bloody chickens are dead when we eat them and we have to learn to make some use of our dead."

The blackout didn't open on Lenny. Murdi left the bar, stopping to talk to Mrs. Poole, sitting down at a far table filled with people wrapped in mufflers and conversation. The excitement in England wasn't in the bombs but the voice, the voice that never expected any-

thing new to be flung up out of the ground, and so the voice looked toward speech to get excitement out of a day. The English were passionately fond of talking, particularly to one another.

I took up my change from the bar and told Nora, "Lenny was supposed to come in but she hasn't. I thought I would go looking for her, probably at the Duke of York."

"That's where she goes with Robert."

"I know, she told me."

"And Robert was here, which means Lenny wouldn't be at the York."

"Does Lenny have a phone?"

"Not at home."

"Can I go to her place?"

"I wouldn't. If Lenny said she'll come, she'll be here."

"But she's not here and the booze will be out soon, which means Mr. Stewart will be calling time. Where else could she be?"

"She'll only come here. And there's a simple thing like tomorrow."

A roaring blast shook the Dog and Duck. I ducked and Nora grabbed my arm, digging her nails into me. We waited for the next blast. Two more bombs, big ones, exploded, and I felt the Dog and Duck shudder.

"No more! No more!" Mrs. Poole cried out.

"Somebody is dead if it didn't fall on an empty road," Nora said. "I never believe it's happening, I never believed a day of the blitz. We aren't made to believe such things but there it was."

"What do we believe?" I asked Nora, feeling stupid as I said it. My hands were wet and cold. A fourth bomb

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thundered, flinging glasses off the bar of the Dog and Duck. I wanted to run. But where do you run? Nora didn't move.

"Don't try to go out," Nora said. "You never know when you move if you aren't moving into the path of a bomb. I was buried during the real blitz. A house caved in on me on Fitzroy Street. I knew I wasn't going to die. It just didn't seem to be possible to die on a Wednesday at 4 o'clock. And I kept wondering how long I would have to be dead if I died. Isn't that silly? Then I heard a Home Guard voice cry out, 'Nora's buried in there. We ought to get her out. She's a good hump.' They dug me out but the two Home Guards didn't lay claim to their prize."

The bar lifted up. A terrible boom shook the pub, shattering booms, following one on the other. The Dog and Duck was missed. But the pub emptied, everybody running into the street. A great fire lit the sky near Oxford Street. Sirens headed for the fire. Nora held on tightly to my hand. I started for the flames.

"Don't go," Nora said, "they have experts for those things now. Everybody else is in the way like at a funeral. Let's go. That was the last of the bombs. Lenny won't come any more tonight. The bombs upset her. Even more than her periods. Why don't you take us both to America in your duffel bag?"

We turned, curiously alive, because others were dead on Oxford Street, away from the Dog and Duck toward Charlotte Street. The smoke poured up, blacker than the blackout. Flames lit the black sky and the searchlights began to hunt for the bombers. The restaurants on Charlotte Street emptied and everybody stood staring at the

flames that came from Oxford Street. I stared in wonder, for it was the first time I had seen London physically bombed, had seen actual flames, had felt bombs hit the London earth and had felt that I could be immediately dead. I pointed toward the smoke and asked Nora if Lenny lived anywhere near the bomb drop.

"No, Lenny wouldn't permit herself to get killed by a bomb. Come on, let's go into the Duke. We can get some eggs and whisky."

The Duke was a dirty pub, filled with whores and tables of Lesbians. Nora told me the bartender was famous as a retired pimp who liked boys from 13 to 15 and girls from 12 to 17. I bought four hard-boiled eggs, as expensive as whisky. Nora broke the shell of her egg, sprinkling salt on it, stuffing the entire egg in her mouth. Eggs, Nora said, had vanished from England but she was more worried about the time when English life would vanish from eggs.

I listened for the All Clear. Two bombs exploded at a rumbling distance from the Duke. Two Lesbians stood next to us quietly sucking tongues. The German bomber still had a few more minutes of desperate life before the searchlights isolated him and the ack-ack batteries destroyed him.

"Where does Lenny live?" I asked Nora.

"It's on Baker Street. It sounds like fun to live so near to Sherlock Holmes but she and Robert have a terrible little flat. The nice mews off Baker Street have been taken over by the colonels and the floozies. We all want to be comfortable, my God, that's the balls of everything. I don't think I've been comfortable since I was 8 years old. There was such great comfort then. The end of

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the insane nineteenth century. Being wrapped in waves of eiderdown. Coming home on ancient holidays to a big house with roaring fireplaces. I actually owned a horse. The horse had enormous black eyes and everything else. The first boy I slept with had such a thin caved-in white chest. He was so white. A terrible white skin. He jumped up and down on me as if he were a yo-yo. He was the first one and I let him do with me as he pleased, just as I did at my baptism."

Nora rubbed her hands on my leg as she spoke. She swayed back and forth on the high stool. Her lips wet, her eyes narrowing, her hands dug into my leg as another bomb fell. Nora got off the stool, crumbling ~~the egg-~~shells.

"God," Nora told me, "how I would like to sit in ten inches of hot boiling water and soak and soak."

We were on the black street. Quiet. No sirens. No bombs. No ack-ack. No flames from Oxford Street. The blackout remained. I told Nora that three million soldiers were within a bicycle ride of London, the most fantastic army the world had yet organized to prove once again that war at least had the merit of resolving immediate difficulties. So does an enema, Nora said.

"It is sadly historical," Nora said, "this blackout. Just to see it. I don't believe it. Who does? Milton? Shakespeare? Chaucer? Johnson? Dickens? They're so dead without us. We are glorious unto ourselves."

Nora turned into a doorway off Charlotte Street, a black doorway with the smell of tobacco. Nora took me into the deep dark corner of the doorway, leaning against the latch, moaning softly, "Now, now, now, now." And I knew what she meant when she put her hands on my legs

again. Her hands trembled. But she didn't hesitate. She went straight to my trousers, opening them, slipping her hands inside, taking hold of me, rubbing me back and forth, her hands cupping me as you keep a match going in the wind, and then she spread her legs wide, pulling me toward her and into her, as far as I could go, and when I had settled, she moved up and down on me as best she could, breathing heavy, and when she lunged forward, to grab me as though the blackout had burst into a dazzling sun with turtles trumpeting and eagles carrying the news, Nora delivered herself, pulling me out of her, her breathing heavy; and her face in the black ~~darkness~~ ^{dark} that I could see now as cats must view humans, was surprised as a baby's who has just climbed its first flight of stairs.

"Well!" Nora said. "Done! The human race can do everything."

We went toward Fitzroy Street with no more explanation of what happened in the doorway than a penitent gives for prayer.

I wanted now to go back to the Dog and Duck, to see if Lenny showed up, to find Lenny in the crazy blackout, to get out of the blackout and lie naked with Lenny in a clean West End hotel with starched sheets and the blessed hotel stillness. But Nora told me all of the pubs had called time, no more time to enter into that prayer that is visible on the walls of Khajuraho and in lesser Western art on the men's toilets in Canton, Ohio.

"You won't find her again tonight," Nora said. "It's late. Robert never gets to sleep unless she's in. And he has a nasty habit of hitting on occasion. Let's go up and sleep. The morning is the best time for explanations and

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everything else.”

I pushed open the door to Nora’s house, pushing aside the blackout curtains, pushing into Nora’s hallway, the dirty carpet, the odors that never got into the street. Nora’s building looked like the ugly brownstones in the West Seventies that line New York like shattered hearses. Where was Hercules to clean out the stables? But we no longer lived in an age of heroes. For all of us overnight had been made heroes. What would we do with ourselves once we really found out who we were? To whom could we shout the news?

“My God,” Nora said, “why didn’t we ever borrow the pissoir from the French!”

Nora hurried to her hall toilet. I pushed open the door to Nora’s flat and as the door pushed open, I saw Lenny and I stepped forward too quickly because her husband was also in the room.

10

Nora wrote: I woke this morning and went to the Royal Academy and looked at two pictures by Augustus John and he treated me to lunch at the Café Royal. It was nice to be stared at for the right reasons. I wish John would give me a painting instead of lunch so I could sell it and have some ready cash. He's about the only painter in England who is great and who will continue to be great and fifty Johns today will be worth a thousand other Johns twenty years from now. I'm startled to think of how old I'll be in twenty years. I had lunch with Lenny. She sported a bruised face and I think Robert hit her. But Lenny looked lovely. I think it's exciting for her to feel about you. Lenny told me about your letters. I've told Lenny to write for *Horizon* but she thinks writing ought to be done by writers. Sophie went off to Glasgow with an American corporal from Battle Creek, Michigan. He picked her up at a Lyons Corner House by buying her a cheese sandwich. Sophie's luck seems to be improving. I had another argument with my landlady. This time about the rent. Lenny stayed with me for two days and my landlady thinks I'm running a brothel. Robert went up to Leeds to see about a job. He hates London. I had four good sittings with Lenny and her picture in oil is coming along nicely. It will now cost you £18 and the

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price will be £25 if I hang it in the London Painters' show. I have your letter in front of me and I won't tell you a thing about Lenny that you shouldn't find out yourself.

Buber wrote: Your ten-page letter on Lenny and her husband I'm going to save. There wasn't a single cut by your censor. Don't get too worked up about husbands. The natural desire in the world, as seen in business, is for everyone to want to fuck everyone else. *The N.Y. Times* continues to keep me informed about the Eighth Air Force. I can't imagine what a flight of five hundred or a thousand bombers loaded with bombs looks like, so if you can, please get it down on paper. I just published a short piece relating my adventures on KP, which saved ~~me~~ ^{me} a \$5,000 psychiatric bill. I'm beginning to like my hotel room. This vestal hotel is slowly being transformed into a quiet but efficient whorehouse with a subsequent lack of service for the official guests. I imagine the N.Y. whores are no different than the London whores, except the whores aren't so visible here in New York. New York was always a city of low visibility. There's a brownout in New York, which gives the city a slight war look. The real war look is in the satisfied faces of the people I see, which I would like to get down on paper if I was Henry James or Isaiah. I'm becoming more and more fascinated by James and I'm doing my best to keep from becoming expert on James. I like to read him the way a man sleeps with his wife, rather than a girl friend. I gave up the Westchester matron. She became too expensive and a bore. American women, you'll learn on your return, become a nuisance once you begin to screw them seriously. The best solution to American sex is to marry and to en-

joy a good fantasy life. So you met Murdi. He's legitimate. He's probably the best noncritic of painters in the world today, which is a helluvah achievement right now. He knows people like Moore, etc., if you're interested. But I would stick with Lenny. I think your instinct is good in these matters, and if it isn't, then use your common sense.

Lenny wrote: I had a very big row with Robert. And it decided him on rushing off to Leeds to look into a job as a draftsman. We are in need of simple physical money, and I don't know how long I'll continue to stay with Stillman and Lewis. The books we do give me no pleasure. I just sent off a batch of winter writers to New York. The only American writer I can read right now is Damon Runyon. He at least is able to make America seem like a simple-minded paradise and I don't think there's anything I want so much right now. I'm sorry about the mix-up that night. This is what happened. Robert called me and said let's eat out. I told him we didn't have any money to eat out. He got angry and hung up. Later he called back and said he had some money. We met at a terrible restaurant called the Grange. I had some mince that was made with sawdust. I should know better and stick to fish. Robert yelled at the waitress and she deliberately spilled tea on his jacket. He was nervous because I was nervous. I never fail to communicate it to him and he still doesn't understand when it happens, even after five years. I wanted to be out of the Grange and of course with you at the Dog and Duck. On Dean Street we quarreled again and he rushed off. I knew he was rushing off to the Dog and Duck because that's where he would expect me to come. I walked for an hour, something I

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haven't done in years alone at night in London. I was approached by at least a hundred Americans, all of them waving £5 notes in my face, and if I had the capacity of Catherine I would have earned a minimum of £500. Nora told me, never mind Catherine and earn £100. You're right, it is an extraordinary sight, the line of prostitutes standing so lumpily on Coventry Street and it made me wonder about English mothers. We are a nation that specializes in useless human beings. I wonder how many of the English have seen the sight on Coventry Street. What for example would Churchill say, or the King? Or even an Archbishop? I decided to risk a further quarrel and I crossed from Shaftesbury Avenue to get to the Dog and Duck when the alert sounded. I didn't like the sound of the sirens and I took shelter for a few minutes in the Underground station at Piccadilly under the pretense of getting cigarettes. I was approached by another 100 Americans and at one point was even offered £15. The Underground station made me feel too sick. It is an absurd world, the world we carved under the London streets so that the trains can go a little faster and permit more automobile congestion on the streets. Absurd and uniformly ugly. I came out of the station and heard the bombs fall and having heard the bombs I knew it was all clear. I came to the Dog and Duck and it was shuttered. I was politely told by a drunk on the corner that everyone had gone home to fuck themselves silly, since the bombs had missed the pub by four blocks. I went into the Duke of York and there was Robert. I asked him if he had seen Nora and he told me Nora was with an American soldier who was feeding her enough booze for an embalming. Robert doesn't like Nora. I persuaded

Robert to come up to Nora's and there we waited. He didn't know why and now he does. For I will never forget the look on your face when you saw me, and it made me feel, once again, that it was good to be of reasonably sound health, young, and with a hope that Big Julie hasn't forgotten me after all.

11

And now I must pause to look at myself. For we are all mirrors.

There is no depth. There is only space. The untenable space of the universe that seems to be reproduced in each one of us. And if it is, then we are lucky. For then each one of us has a claim on the prize wrapped up in the cloudless plain brown wrapper of space.

Of time I won't say a word.

Of love. Who has known it?

Love, like God and spirit and holy and children and peace and even death, had lost its preparation. We seemed in this warring month of the twentieth century to be merely catapulted. And to drop like a plumb line, to seek again like a cat turned loose from its city apartment, food and mating, to feel again, the peculiar magic of existence, that seemed to be the proper vocation of a soldier—and the rest of it, the war, that would somehow be won, like the daily triumph of our bowels.

And Lenny?

Why did I need more than the receptacle Nora made available to me? You have heard of the legendary man who went cave-crawling into the ten or twenty billion nerve cells of our body. You know Oedipus. I don't want to flatter myself by pretending that I'm an ancient king

revisiting the earth again like mushrooms after a rain-storm. Of course Nora was a mother to me. And I have already said that what we did in the doorway of the London tobacconist's shop was to pray, at least as prayer is understood today. Aren't all cathedrals designed to pierce the dome of the sky? Who has failed to notice the tower of a church in Harlem that is a vast turgid thrust and as at home in the Manhattan sky as the pigeons?

I had prayed then with Nora, or, more accurately, assisted in the prayer, probably like a priest who gives absolution to a woman while wondering about his own salvation.

Lenny was in the future. And the future is our most dazzling invention. Even more dazzling than the miles we have given to the distances between stars.

And it was to the future that I shook Robert's hand and looked at Lenny as though she was the prize we would fight for after breaking clean from our handshake.

12

Did you ever hear of a 100-mission party? Neither had I. But we were planning a 100-mission party. A party the twelve Caesars wouldn't dare, nor Gargantua, give. The entire air base, surrounded by a perimeter of English farms, was going to be flung open to the populace, and for a day, like a day in hell, the missions would cease and only the pain continue. We are all of us human to the last, and I immediately thought of Lenny when I heard the news from Sirota, for I could see Lenny coming up the road past the guard station, into the compound of Nissen huts, to be with me under the best possible conditions a man can be with a woman, a suspension of time. A truce was to be called. Not in my private war but in the great war. The war that history might forget but not its combatants.

But first, do you know what 100 missions is? I didn't believe I had watched 100 missions. Ploesti, Schweinfurt, Regensburg, Marienburg, Munich, Berlin, Hamburg, Nuremberg, Ludwigshafen, Mannheim, Wesel, Grossostheim, Merseburg, Duisberg, Augsburg, Hanover, Gustavsborg, Cologne, all targets, all recorded like all the other minutiae of the twentieth century, and since the task of our lives seems to be to reconstruct the past, let me reconstruct a mission for you. Let the target be Ber-

lin. The B-17s, 500 B-17s, flying across East Anglia, the North Sea, Holland, into Germany, past concentrations of German fighters, German ack-ack, must remain in the protective formation of flying geese, almost wing tip to wing tip, delicately balanced, with one machine gunner seated in the underbelly of the Fortress, one gunner in the tail, two machine gunners at the waist, the pilots, navigators, bombardiers up front, the Fortress handled with the disturbing accommodation of men to machines in our century, until the target is reached, and then for five seconds the plane must be held on a straight-level flight, so that the bombs can fall with reasonable accuracy. It is perhaps the most cumbersome way men have invented to kill one another since Hannibal took his elephants over the Alps. But let me tell you about a mission in the words of T. Sergeant Allen, waist gunner:

We were briefed for Big B. Berlin. We took off on the morning of August 17. En route to the I.P., flak hit the No. 2 engine and the left wing. The No. 2 engine started smoking and throwing oil. The pilot couldn't feather the No. 2 engine. There was a terrific drag from the No. 3 engine, which was windmilling. Just before getting to the I.P., the ship began to lose air speed and altitude. We dropped steadily behind the bomb division. An enemy JU 88 tried to get at us but the tail gunner, T. Sergeant Martin, got rid of him. At this time we lost the formation. We still had the bomb load and the bombs were aborted over Berlin to lighten the load. The bomb division was already over the target area. We were briefed that after hitting the target area the bomb group would make a left turn. We were then about a mile from the bomb division. But we lost 14,000 feet and there was no

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chance of catching the formation. We were alone and signaled for fighter protection. Two P-51s came down to where we were, looked at us, and then flew away. We were getting considerable smoke from the No. 2 engine and the No. 1 was now giving us trouble. Our pilot asked us what we would like to do, bail out over Germany, which none of us liked, or try to make it out of Germany. We all agreed to fight our way back to England. We were then at 11,000 feet. But after flying through some more flak we realized that we would never make it to England or even get close enough to ditch in the North Sea. The pilot set a course for the nearest neutral country. We reached the coast of Germany and then flak boats and concentrations of flak from the ground opened on us. It was very accurate and intense flak. We were completely boxed in, but even with the plane so badly damaged the pilot managed to take evasive action. It was a helluva accurate flak. We got some direct hits. But luck was with us. One shell exploded over the ship. It wasn't a direct hit. But it ripped a hole in the wing. Other flak hit the waist and No. 1 prop. We had a check on who got hit. Waist gunner T. Sergeant Eddy reported getting hit. He said he thought he had some flak in his arm but it was nothing to worry about. So we all stayed at our positions. The ship dropped more altitude, then the No. 1 prop froze up, twisting off. We were crossing into neutral territory. The No. 2 engine was smoking bad but it couldn't be feathered. The No. 3 was windmilling. The plane needed some power to lift the right wing. I was called by the pilot from my turret to check the flak damage done before the pilot could land the plane. Just as I was getting out of my turret I saw two planes at 8

o'clock high. So I slid back into my turret. I thought they could be escort ships from a neutral country. I held my fire until they began firing on us. One of the planes came in at us and the other plane stayed back. The attacking plane did a lot of damage. Twenty-mm. shells blew up the tail position, hitting the ammunition. I fired at the attacking plane in a steady stream. The No. 3 engine was now throwing smoke and oil. The interphone was shot out so the pilot had me go to the rear of the ship to tell the rest of the crew to bail out. I saw the tail gunner was dead. He had machine-gun slugs through his chest and head. The two waist gunners were hit but they could manage. I told them to leave the ship. I went back to my turret. The enemy fighter came in for a third pass. This time his fire hit radio operator T. Sergeant Downs. The exploding shells and machine gun slugs caught him in the face and chest. I went to him and saw that he was dead. T. Sergeant Eddy and T. Sergeant Hackett were helping Sergeant Wisse with his parachute harness as his arm was pretty well shot off and he would not be able to pull the rip cord. Just then the enemy fighter came in for his fourth pass. T. Sergeant Tarns was in the line of fire. I went to him and thought he was dead but I dragged him up to the bomb bay. Just then I saw Evans, Powers, and Hughes leave the plane. T. Sergeant Tarns tried to get up to go back to his gun but he slumped over dead. I then left the plane, going through the bomb bay. As I was coming down in my chute, I saw the ship hit the ground on its nose and begin to burn. I received a broken leg so I couldn't go over to the crash, which was about a mile away. I later learned Sergeant Wisse was found dead in his parachute harness. And the

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pilot was found dead near the crash with his chute unopened. T. Sergeant Martin's body was found badly burned in the wreckage of the plane.

Sirota told me about the 100-mission party as we walked toward the PX. He said the CO had dreamed it up. The air base was going to be opened to the English civilians. Everybody from the neighboring towns would be invited. Stowmarket. Bury St. Edmunds. Ipswich. London. From 0700 hours to 0700 hours there would be no war. No missions. No flights.

"This you won't believe," Sirota told me. "The mess hall is going to be turned into a banquet hall and you can invite who you want for the feast. There's going to be a special train from London and special buses from Ipswich, Stowmarket, Bury St. Edmunds, and Cambridge. That means maybe fifteen hundred girls will be turned loose on the base. Everybody will think the war is over."

"Maybe it is over," I said.

"How in the hell does a war like this end?" Sirota asked.

"When is this party coming off?"

"Three Sundays. That's time to get the letters off to all the shack-ups. This place will look like a whorehouse as big as Yankee Stadium."

I sat down and wrote a letter to Lenny that she would no more believe than if my letter had been postmarked BERLIN.

Lenny wrote back immediately and said she would come even if it meant leaving Robert, her job, her flat, and part of her sanity: I absolutely don't believe there is going to be such a party. And even if there is such a party

I won't believe it. And if I have children and tell it to my children they won't ever believe it. I've already told Nora and she said you must get her a GI to invite her up. But I don't think she'll come. Anyhow I wouldn't want her there when I'm there. I think I'll have some trouble getting away but nothing like the trouble there'll be if I can't get away. I've already looked into the British Museum for a precedent to such a party but I can't find one. Maybe there's a precedent in American history. Though I doubt it. I think anyhow precedents are a thing of the past. You say the mess hall will be open to us! I can see us all gnawing on steak and eating vanilla ice cream till we can all be squeezed into the Garden of Eden. Your captain must be mad. Or is it a colonel or a general? But his name will be remembered as long in British history as Jack the Ripper. All my love. I hope you know how anxious I am to be there.

Nora wrote: I have everybody in Bloomsbury wanting to come to your party. But I'll leave you alone with Lenny. Lenny needs a party after that meeting in my flat. But it's a small price to pay for having a husband as accommodating as Robert around. He can't paint. He's been reading your American art magazines. And now he thinks that if his name is shouted ten times in Hyde Park he'll be as famous as Wrigley's chewing gum. He asked about you. "Is he a famous American writer?" Robert is still a little awed by me and thinks I only know famous people. Remember I told him nothing about you. Don't forget to send me my pound note for the rent. I think you still owe me £2 for Lenny's drawing. I'm finishing Lenny's oil and you can buy it first. I think an oil should always be expensive. Does this party of

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yours mean that the war is coming to an end or just beginning?

Buber wrote: Your party sounds great but I don't believe there's that much imagination left in the American soul. If the party comes off, we may still be saved. Nora is great for you. And I would get into bed with her at every opportunity you can. And I would try to stay sober one time, if you can. Nora has some reputation here, particularly among people who were around Paris in the twenties. Her book had a fair sale here, but it wasn't dirty enough to linger in people's minds. I'm working on an article now about American writers. I claim the present great American writers are only known because they once wrote a dirty book. I know a lot of guys who try to write dirty books but they're miserable and they lack innocence. Louisiana, if you remember, was rough, yet all of the people were innocent. A little 15-year-old Chickasaw Indian girl blew me in Monroe and she was so innocent that I felt ashamed that she blew me. Yet she loved it. Sex counts in American writing when the writer is awed. That was the mistake of Frank Harris. He thought he could go around telling Americans that they had a cock and balls in the 1900s. All Americans believe that no American ever got laid before 1919. And no American yet has ever been blown in the standard literature. The whole business is fascinating. And I envy you. I'm here in N.Y.C., which is like a fat pig now but you're there where it counts. The day is real for you. Don't ever forget that. I'm already beginning to lose that feeling in the city. Once you've lost it you've lost just about everything that you have to lose. Excuse this kind of crap. I don't know what it is I miss from the Army, unless it's what I

get from your letters. Stay with Lenny. She sounds good for you. With Lenny there aren't any ground rules like there are for Nora. With Lenny you're on your own. And don't let it worry you. Because that's the best way to be with a woman.

I walked away from the cluster of headquarter buildings toward the air strip to see if preparations had begun for the 100-mission party. But the only preparations I could see were for the continuation of the war. Jeeps hurried toward the landing strips. I could see the ambulances move forward, the fire trucks. The planes were returning from Marienburg. I had never flown. I seemed to be reserving flight for the eternity when I would soar into all of the secret places of the universe. How could we ever exhaust that journey? Overhead, swooping low, in a great round robin, the B-17s circled the base so that they could land and be safely tucked away like chessmen in a wooden box. Flares went up signaling wounded men. I saw one plane with a chunk of a wing shot away. The fire crew began to follow the roaring Fortress. The wounded men would get Purple Hearts, Air Medals, DFCs, DSCs, perhaps even an MOH.

I watched one shattered Fortress come in for its landing, circling like an eagle with its wings torn off. The Fortress came to a great drafty stop. The ambulance men hurried forward. They carried out Harry Gutman. Half of his face was shot away. His flight uniform was soaking in blood. Gutman was from Toledo, Ohio. I knew Gutman. He came in to talk to me about his mission to Munich. He wanted his crew to get DFCs. He told me: "Here's the big sky. Below is Munich on fire. Two of our planes went down immediately before we started the

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bomb run. The flak was fantastic. But we made the bomb run. I don't know what the bombs hit. Probably a lot of Germans. Munich is a big built-up town. You can't miss when the bombs fall. The whole god damn place seems to be railway lines. And the Germans tie them up like they were bleeding arteries. I had the only fit plane and the crew elected to stay behind and fight off the Messerschmidts. It's such a funny thing the bomb run, it's like going off the rim of the world, like getting laid when you're not just getting laid, which is one of the great American dreams, not to just get laid."

Gutman died on the stretcher. They had a transfusion set up for him. But there's no transfusion between life and death. Except in a seed. And we are in our death, seeds. If not, then why die? I carried the stories for medals around in my head like tombstones. Lieutenant Lewis Kearns distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement in aerial flight while serving as First Pilot on a heavy bombardment mission to Mannheim on December 5. On the mission to Mannheim Lieutenant Kearns' plane was attacked by ten enemy aircraft. The enemy planes made twelve vicious passes at his aircraft but the withering fire from the gunners on Lieutenant Kearns' aircraft drove off the fighters and Lieutenant Kearns resolutely continued on course and bombed the primary target with good results. Lieutenant Williams distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in aerial flight while serving as First Pilot on a heavy bombardment mission to Nalbach, Germany. Sergeant Mayer distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism while serving as tail gunner on a heavy bombardment mission to Augsburg, Germany. Attacking simultaneously from op-

posite sides, two enemy planes raked his aircraft with gunfire, knocking out the No. 4 engine and further damaging the plane. Sergeant Mayer rushed to his gun and poured a continuous stream of fire at the attacking planes to deadly advantage. After several minutes of furious action, the two enemy fighters peeled off and abandoned their attack. The devastating fire delivered by Sergeant Mayer contributed greatly to driving off the two JU 88s and contributed greatly to the survival of his straggling aircraft.

If we had already flown 100 missions then this was the 101st or 105th or 110th. I didn't know. Above me I could see the hundreds and hundreds of Fortresses droning toward the air bases that now turned England into a landing strip. Sergeant Golden fell into step with me.

"Gutman died," he said.

"Yes," I answered.

I thought Golden might have some remarkable observation to make about the death of Gutman. But he didn't. Sergeant Golden was gay. And how he escaped the attention of the officers was a mystery, unless we had all stopped looking at one another.

"You heard about the 100-mission party?" Sergeant Golden asked me.

"From Sirota."

"Sirota knows more than the generals and they know nothing."

I heard what Golden said about the generals. I didn't agree or disagree. The war! This was the war. Golden at my side in a fleece-lined jacket he had inherited from a dead waist gunner. Gutman dead. Dead as they come. The air base was a muddy gray. The planes had all left

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the sky. Mud splattered from the jeeps. Golden cried out at the jeeps, *fuck you, fuck you*, and it seemed extraordinary to me, the power we had invested in the word, even to the extent of hiding it from all of the other words in the dictionary. Why not look at the muddy sky in awe?

Sergeant Golden and I went into our Nissen hut. Have you ever entered a Nissen hut? It's like a great garbage can cut in half. In the middle of the hut is a coal stove. Along the corrugated walls are the cots made up with the precision of a slide rule. The foot lockers are filled with the remnants of private property. I had my foot locker filled with a map of London, a copy of *Moby Dick*, a copy of Thoreau, a copy of William James, an extra pair of shoes that I bought on Bond Street, two new OD shirts Sirota procured for me, Nora's drawing of Lenny, the letters from Buber, and five cartons of Chesterfields I was saving for Lenny.

We all dressed and undressed in the great garbage can. We all wore the identical clothes. We all cursed in the same half-dozen words. We all told fantastic stories. We did what men do when they live together. We had no mysteries but ourselves. Patrick Royce liked to lie in his sack and pull himself off and you could begin to see his eyeballs roll around in his head when he began his journey.

I threw some coal into the stove, banking the fire so that it wouldn't need attention until supper, and I lay down on my cot, tired from the death of Gutman. I could look into the length of the Nissen hut from my cot in the far corner. I propped up my pillow. This was sack time. The children's hour of the armed forces. I reread Nora's

letter, Lenny's letter, Buber's letter; I listened to the B.B.C., I listened to the talk in the hut, Evans telling Isenberg how he tied the tails of two cats together in Oklahoma and hung them over a clothesline and let them fight one another to death. What were we all trying to tell one another? I am convinced that each one of us is a universe, a universe with all of the awe that we attribute to the cold worlds of space. What else were we on this Friday evening of the war with 100 missions flown, 100 more scheduled, and the coast of Europe waiting for the bodies of two million troops? What was this peculiar world that lay under my cot, 8,000 miles this way, 25,000 miles that way, whirling at a speed the P-47s hadn't caught up with yet? This was a world war. A total war. How did it happen? I didn't know. Was there really fighting going on in every part of the world, Pago Pago included? *Yank* said so. I couldn't believe the jungle fighting in the Pacific. But then who could believe the air battles over Germany? And what if we killed fifty thousand Germans or five hundred thousand Germans or fifty million Germans? What if there wasn't a single German left? Would that be winning the war? And if I was killed? *Golden*? Davis? Papp? Marks? Hunter? Rizzo? Sirota? Was the death wish so strong that it could even survive life?

I listened to the wild rumors about the 100-mission party. A thousand whores were going to be imported from London and the fee paid out of the PX income. The officers had buried a hundred cases of booze in the ammunition dump. The great hangar for B-17s was to be emptied of planes and the hangar turned into a vast Roman arena. The girls were going to be taken up in the

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B-17s and £20 charged for the privilege of hosing in the clouds. The infirmary was going to be turned into a gigantic whorehouse with the MDs on duty all night to give pro's. Every man was going to be marched into the hangar the night before the party to be given a short-arm. The most fantastic rumor of all was true, that the party was going to be given, the date set, and Lenny arrive.

13

I saw Lenny first and then the girls hurrying up the dusty road with her. Lenny wore her tan checkered tweed coat. She didn't have a hat on. Her hair looked golden in the English sun. She walked beautifully. Her step firm. Her eyes straight ahead. She looked like the leader of the band of angels from the 10:10 London train.

Oak trees grew by the roadside. Bushes, grass, pasture. Great cows mooed. I waited until Lenny reached the entry to the base, the squat sentry box where it meant your life if you fell asleep on duty. And when Lenny saw that she was entering a place of war, I waved to her. Lenny waved back and came running up to me. The other girls began waving. And they all broke to find the men who had invited them from London to show them a day of peace.

"It's good," Lenny said, "it's so good." She took my hand and I told her we would walk over to my Nissen hut, where she could leave her coat. A coat wasn't necessary. The sun was brilliant and clear, the absolute master of the sky.

Sirota, Golden, the Oklahoman, got up for introductions. I showed Lenny my bed, the field locker, the GI blankets pulled taut, the scrubbed floors, the table set up

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in the middle of the hut with roast beef, roast chicken, potato salad, olives, pickles, Haig & Haig, and a quart jar of the 180-proof medicinal alcohol from the infirmary with bits of pineapple innocently floating on the rim.

Lenny took off her coat. She wore a brown tweed suit and a fawn cashmere. I liked the way she put her coat on my bed. She smiled at me.

Sirota came up to us with drinks from the jar of 180-proof.

"What is it?" Lenny asked Sirota.

"180-proof alcohol mixed with water and pineapple juice. But that doesn't tell you what it is. That only tells you what's in it. Everybody has their own opinion about what it is. To your health."

Sirota downed his drink. Lenny sipped it. She sipped it again. "My god," she said, "this is what gin must have tasted like in the 1700s. It's good." Lenny set her glass down on my field locker, not finishing the drink.

Golden came up with a plate of roast beef. Golden tried to appraise Lenny but he had no way of knowing her. Sirota looked at Lenny as though he had always known her. The Oklahoman never took his eyes off of Lenny's ass.

"Can we go out, over the base?" Lenny asked.

We walked out of the Nissen hut, into the brilliant sun. Lenny stared at the Nissen huts laid down alongside one another, as temporary as ant heaps. She paused at the six-man tents dug in by the engineering outfit. And she saw the first brute indication that this was a fighting base. The long shining 90-mm. guns that the engineers carried with them as a westerner wraps a double-hung

gun belt around his waist. The engineers looked like soldiers.

We passed the motor pool, the trucks and jeeps scrubbed down, 50-caliber machine guns mounted on the hoods. We walked past the gray corrugated buildings that I identified for Lenny and then we began to approach the runways.

Here the wind picked up. Here the sun bounced off the gun turrets. Here the runways stretched toward Germany. Here was the new world. The new war. The great hangars loomed up where men busied themselves with the extraordinary skill of knowing the four hundred thousand component parts that made up a B-17 Flying Fortress. The manufacture of one single radial-type engine required more than thirty thousand operations. Information that I had picked up in the mess hall and that I passed on to Lenny.

We approached the B-17s lined up down the vast length of the runways.

Lenny gasped at the sight of the planes. They stretched down the runway, almost wing tip to wing tip.

"Can we go aboard one?" she asked.

"Not any one, but some of the planes are open for inspection."

"All this," she said, "to carry burning coals to Newcastle."

"And back again," I said.

"How many miles to Babylon?" Lenny asked and then answered, "Threescore miles and ten. Can I get there by candlelight? Yes, and back again."

Her voice was sad, as the English can be sad, as

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though with all their knowledge, with all the tradition of tradition, they should know better or do better or at least not pretend not to know. Anne must have laid her neck on the chopping block with the same sad sadness. And Sir Walter Raleigh. And the others. We don't know the English. And the English seldom tell us the truth about themselves. I half mumbled the word "truth." Lenny picked it up.

"What did you mean?" she asked.

"Just this." I pointed to the B-17s.

"You don't try to make sense of this, do you?"

"No." My voice was hesitant but Lenny didn't hear the hesitancy.

"Good, then," she said.

Lenny took my hand. Her hand was moist and closed over mine. Her hand drew me into her, just as in those unexpected instances in bed, when you feel yourself enclosed and you know the warmth that must have accompanied the first of us. That is what frightens us in sex. It takes us too far back. And leaves us nowhere. What good does it do for us to know who we are? To whom can we tell the glad news?

Lenny wanted to walk along the runway. I looked toward the control tower. Nobody waved us off the runway. We entered the runway. I could feel our gait pick up speed as though we would both begin to hurl forward and take off into that extraordinary world where men and women are in love with one another. Lenny gripped my hand. The planes excited her. The guns poking out of the Fortress like Indian temple sculpture. The planes lined up as mightily as the thumping elephants in a circus when they rise on their forelegs and lock themselves

in a chain the length of the sawdust ring.

Here the earth stretched bleak in a vast outpouring of concrete. We walked the length of twenty Fortresses and Lenny suddenly said, "Let's go back."

We turned off the concrete, back onto grass, going under the savage noses of the Fortresses. Lenny stopped to touch a tail gun. She stared at the belly turrets. "Does a man really sit in there all through the flight? My God, what a vision he must have of the world. How can he ever go back to a wife or a family or whatever people do when a war is over? Can you show me later one of the men who sit in this bubble?"

"There's one now." I pointed to Fred Downs, who was from Santa Barbara. He was drunk and looking over his own plane, "The Pacific." Downs was 23. He had flown twenty-six missions. He liked to talk about the mission to Schweinfurt, where sixty B-17s were shot down and hundreds of German fighters blackened the sky, the sky a running battle almost from the coast of England, the first great air battle of the modern world. The target was ball bearings, the ball bearings necessary to run a modern war. "It was the sky. It wasn't the sky any more. It was like a battlefield in those old World War I movies. The planes dropped like wounded men. All around the sky was smoke and fire and the German bastards shooting in and out and trying to get us like a kid running wild with a kitchen knife in a pack of balloons. I got one bastard. I knew I got him because I could feel the fucking bullets from my gun going right into him. That's the only way you can ever put in for a claim. When you know you got the bastard. You can't say it without knowing it. You got to know. The prick went down."

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I waved to Downs. He waved back and held up a bottle of Vat 69. "Do you want to meet him?" I asked Lenny.

"No," she said, "I can see from here that he's mortal, just like the rest of us."

And now we were approaching the other mortals. A great long wooden ramp table had been set up near the Quartermaster. Kegs of beer were lined up. The table was covered with beef, bread, pickles, potato chips, Hershey bars, slabs of butter, tubs of potato salad, Coca-Cola, pretzels.

The roads spiraling into the base were filled with the populace. The towns of Stowmarket, Ipswich, Bury St. Edmunds, London, had accepted the invitation. The men of the towns milled toward the kegs of beer and roast beef, older men, men of the Home Guard who were no longer required to be warriors, and they fell back quite naturally into their shuffling walk, their caps, mufflers.

"It's on the house and there's no time gentlemen!" Lieutenant Al Dewey called out. Some of the men laughed. Dewey had a white apron strapped around his uniform. He held up a mug of beer and began to drink the beer himself. The men laughed. Dewey began filling the mugs pushed toward him.

"Ladies invited too!" Dewey called out. "Take your time, we've got all day to get drunk."

I pushed up to the roaring table and got a pint for Lenny and myself.

"This is American beer!" Lenny said. "You don't bring this too from America?"

"Let me tell you something that the *Times* isn't per-

mitted to print. The Air Force has over five hundred thousand items that it has to have on hand for the war to keep going. I think I heard a general say that for every pilot going up in the air he needs nine tons of supplies a month. In the United States there are hundreds of thousands of people making all this stuff. We probably need a billion gallons of oil a month. Where does it all come from? But if there can be five hundred thousand different kinds of beetles with only two hundred fifty thousand of them named, then it shouldn't be too much of a problem for man who has twenty billion nerve cells to produce this Milwaukee beer in Suffolk."

"They'll be serving this beer all day long?"

"There's enough beer and booze on this base right now to float the Russian Army."

"Beer, beef, and booze. I saw Nora last night. My God, how she wanted to come! She said she wanted to get all boozed up and fall asleep under a cow. She also said that you owe her £2."

"That's for the drawing I bought."

"The red chalk?"

"Yes."

"That's where Nora is good. A quick line. She works too damn hard at her oils now. But the chalk always reminds her of how good she used to be."

"Do painters get bad?"

"Painters like Nora. What's she to paint? She likes to paint me. But she never told me why. Maybe I'm one half of what she was when she was. It's terrible when a woman gets drunk. It's like a man sitting in the Underground with his fly open!"

I almost spilled my beer laughing. Lenny laughed too.

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Lenny looked up at the still sky.

"Are no planes flying today?" she asked, suddenly sad, for no reason except there was good reason to be sad.

"Some."

"There are bases everywhere here, aren't there? That's what you hear in London. That the whole North Sea coast of England is one big American air base. And just there," Lenny pointed west, "is Paris. I first went to Paris when I was 15. I think I had the identical experience of everyone who gets to Paris, feeling that the city had been put up overnight just for me. Paris was never real for me. The postcards were but not Paris. And I'm trying to think what this base is. But I haven't seen enough yet. Come and show me the B-17 that we can crawl into."

The Fortress stood alone, a roped fence around it, with a placard reading: *Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. Gross weight 61,000 lbs. Wing span 103' 9". Length 72'. Height 15' 6".*

"Can we go in it?" Lenny asked.

A crowd was in front of the Fortress and Pfc. George Melton stood above the crowd, high on a ladder, alongside the B-17. He looked over the crowd like a barker at a state fair. When he saw Lenny and me approach the B-17 he began the spiel he had been writing for days at his desk in the headquarters hut.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends, neighbors here in East Anglia, enlisted men, officers, invited guests. You are now standing in front of a B-17 Flying Fortress, the main weapon of the Eighth Air Force and the weapon that is reducing German industry to rubble. The B-17 you see in front of you can climb to 10,000 feet in seven minutes.

It carries eleven 50-caliber machine guns. The normal bomb load is 3,000 pounds but this can be doubled if necessary. The plane can climb to a ceiling of 40,000 feet. The speed of a B-17 is roughly 300 miles per hour. It can strike at any target in Germany. The plane in front of you has been on twenty-eight operational missions over enemy territory. The gunners on this plane have claimed twenty-seven German planes shot down. The targets reached by this plane are a roll call of German industrial cities. Modern war is fought both on the field, in the air, and over the industrial factories. The targets of the Eighth Air Force are the cities that permit the German war machine to keep operating. We intend to destroy these targets, one by one, until Germany is brought to a halt like a ten-wheeled truck that has run out of gasoline. The plane is open for your inspection. You are requested not to remove any equipment. If you have any further questions, we will be happy to answer them, providing the information is not classified and secret. It is no secret that we intend to destroy Germany and the weapon designed for that end is open for your inspection."

Melton spoke in a comfortable Ohio voice, his voice as reassuring as the edge of a razor held against your throat by a neighborhood barber. How do you describe an engine of war? The feat was beyond the capability of Melton; that's why Lieutenant Weber had given him the assignment.

I asked Lenny what she thought of the Fortress.

"Nothing," she said, "nothing but what you told me. That it takes thirty thousand operations to make one engine. Four engines, a hundred and twenty thousand

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operations. It's almost like a person; it takes such a lot of waste to make us. C'mon, let's go in. I may never have the opportunity again and I don't think I'll want it."

We climbed into the Fortress, into its long belly, the thin ribbed walls like the bones of a fossilized Pteranodon, the 50-caliber machine guns wicked, as guns always are, the guns poking out of every extremity of the Fortress, again like an animal designed by nature to be doomed. Inside of the Fortress you couldn't imagine its leaving the ground. This wasn't a plane built to fly. Who had designed the four hundred thousand component parts, and put them together so that the 61,000 pounds would lift off the earth like a feather? Lenny looked at the inside of the Fortress in awe. She touched one of the 50-caliber machine guns. She swung the waist gun. She looked down the belly of the Fortress toward the tail. We climbed up to the cockpit. This was where the pilot, the copilot, the bombardier, and the navigator faced the sky.

"What made it possible?" Lenny asked me.

"Necessity" was all I could think of saying.

"Necessity of what?" she asked. "How do such things occur to us? To other people, I ~~mean~~. The people I know in London don't conceive of things like this. They conceive of books, bad pictures, bad stories, worse lives, even worse flats. I really don't know anyone who makes things. I know a dressmaker. But that's dresses. I know a bootmaker on Baker Street. I suppose we all make things, at least we all make up the world." Lenny spoke as we looked over the cockpit, the extraordinary control panel, where each button had to function as effortlessly as our liver.

"But this," Lenny said. "We seem to be making things in this first half of the twentieth century that none of us can grasp, not alone. We're getting further and further away from something. Just what it is I can't guess. So many people die without knowing. I've often wondered if they're let in on the secret after they're dead. That would be nice of somebody in nature. I'll never forget my first pounding fear when I thought of the world having to go on without me. I had to stuff my hand in my mouth to keep from screaming out. I told Nora about it. Do you know what she told me? She said I should have screamed. Why? I asked Nora. For no reason, she said, except you might have been the one to scare the demon out of us." Lenny looked at me and said, "I've always loved Nora for saying that. It gave me a little hope when I was 19 and London looked like a place where even hope wouldn't do you any good."

"How long have you known Nora?"

"Seven years."

"Has she been the same all through the seven years?"

"You mean she drinking, sitting around the Dog and Duck, talking at loose ends, mostly in her own private dialogues? I always find that about people like Nora, though there aren't too many like her. That they're always waiting for a verdict. If you get a straight word from Nora it comes like a bolt, like a flash of wisdom, like an oracle. And mostly it's the truth, whatever that may be, except we know it when we hear it." Lenny stopped short. She looked sharply at the awesome dial board. "Here we are talking about Nora in the cockpit of a B-17. C'mon, let's see some more of this extraordinary base."

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We climbed out of the Fortress, walking around the line of visitors, queued up, as all England was queued, the rites of the Magna Carta.

"How do the orders come in?" Lenny asked. "Who tells you what to bomb, when to take off, how many bombs to carry? Where do the men sleep who fly the planes and where do you keep the bombs?"

"The bombs are kept there," and I pointed east, toward a clump of trees.

"Can we see them?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you?"

"When I first got to the base. I asked the same question as you did. Where are the bombs kept? I wanted to see them piled up. So I rode out in a jeep with one of the maintenance men and I looked at the bombs. They make an extraordinary pile. You walk around them as you would walk around a hole in the pavement."

"And the orders?"

"They come over a teletype machine from the Eighth Air Force headquarters. Full-scale battle orders with a description of the target, the number of planes to be used, the type of bombs, the rendezvous schedule, the time of the bomb run. It's read to the men at what is called a briefing, at dawn, just minutes away from sleep."

"To wake out of sleep, eat breakfast, do the things men do, and then sit and listen to a description of the target you are to destroy, a target that you can't see, I don't believe it's possible."

"But they do it every day," I said, almost in defense.

"Not even historians believe the things that men do

every day. That's why the best historians are such good storytellers."

We stopped at a long table of food and I made Lenny a thick roast-beef sandwich and got two bottles of beer.

"Let's take some more food and beer and have a picnic somewhere, somewhere near where I came in, where those cows are. These are really farms around you, aren't they, and very real thatched cottages. Couldn't you rent one of them?" Lenny asked.

"I want to."

"Have you tried?"

"Not yet."

"Shall we try now?"

"There's one through the field. It's not far. You have to go through a cow field and you have to watch out for the cow turds. They leave enormous mounds of the stuff."

"Good, let's go."

"Should we take this food with us?"

"Yes, we can eat it on the way."

The cows stared at us with their big cud eyes. Eight cows swished their tails.

"These are real milk cows," Lenny said.

"Yes. When we first got to the base I actually saw a girl on a milking stool and she was squeezing one of the cow's teats and the milk squirted into a pail. It didn't look real then."

"I tried it once. It's extraordinary. I was frightened. I don't trust cows. I don't trust any animal. Even dogs upset me. I don't know why. It's an odd thing not to trust animals. I like them but I don't trust them. I hear even cows will attack you if you disturb them in a field like this."

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"They will and they do. One of the guys almost got kicked to death."

The cows turned toward us, the eight, their eyes following us across the field.

"They know we're here," I told Lenny.

"It's so funny that I don't see them as pastoral. Maybe it's because all of the evil people today look so innocent. Even innocence is evil today. It is evil to be innocent. I sometimes feel I ought to know more about all this——" Lenny pointed back toward the base, over the heads of the cows. "I ought to know how many nuts and bolts and screws go into a B-17, Boeing is it, Flying Fortress, and how high and far it can climb and return again to its destination. I ought to know where the war started, names and dates and places, I ought to know something about this war. But I don't know from reading the *Times*. I do know it a little from the bombs in London. But everyone knows that. The bombs just mean that you may live or die, depending on all the ifs of where you are when they fall. But to live each new day when other people have been bombed, that I find difficult to be ignorant about. But these are things you can only discuss going through a cow pasture. They don't make sense elsewhere."

We got to the railing fence. I helped Lenny over the fence, her breasts coming down on my hands, and they were full breasts, hidden by the casual fawn cashmere. I went over the fence with the beer and the beef. We were in a woods of great trees and I knew that past the trees was a road with a line of three thatched cottages.

We stepped into the woods, cool and dark, still except for the birds.

And then in front of us, but hidden, deep in the grass, we saw a blonde English girl in a floral print dress rising up and down, squatting on top of a GI, two stripes of a corporal on his sleeve. His hands were on her breasts, her open mouth came to suck in his tongue and when she caught his tongue, he pulled her down and turned her over and plowed into her. We could see him digging his boots into grass as he sought to do what every plowman tries to do.

The thatched cottages lay past their bodies. The girl looked as if she would like to sleep. But the corporal began to rise up on his knees. He pulled himself out of the girl to show that he was still hard and when she saw him hard, naked, crouching, she lifted her legs up around his back again and they began as they had ended.

They didn't see us and I didn't think they would hear us going through the woods. We moved away from their bodies. Just as we couldn't see them, the girl rolled over and rose up again on the corporal. She drove herself up and down on him and then she sank down on him like the crest of a wave spilling over into the soaked-up sand of the beach.

We came out of the woods onto the road, a narrow dirt road. The sky was brilliant. Lenny looked at me. Her eyes had the clarity of bells out of reach of the sexton, of bells ringing because they're bells, not heralding 8 P.M. vespers, but ringing and ringing, witness to an act we can seldom imagine people other than ourselves engaged in.

Lenny said, "They did it well. I never watched anyone before. And I don't feel we were watching them, not watching, that isn't the word, we just saw it, that's all."

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"The girl did good."

"Do you think people do well or bad in it? I mean as a skill. I've never known about myself. Nora likes to brag. But I don't believe her when she talks about it."

"You can do it bad."

Lenny asked, "By bad you mean when it's done when one of the people doesn't care or perhaps both don't? Then it's like bad exercise."

"Which it is most of the time," I said, with no way of knowing.

"What should it be?"

"I don't know."

"But the girl astride the corporal. I mean mounted on the corporal. Did you see her face?"

"Yes."

"Then you saw it was blank. A stony blank. All of her muscles seemed to be pulling her skin taut. There was moisture over her forehead. She looked ruthless riding up and down on him. That was what I found so fascinating. Her face. There was no tenderness. She didn't look at the corporal. It was as though she had to freeze her face so that if he did by accident look up at her, he wouldn't see her, I mean really see her. And that again is what's so fascinating. That's the truth of it! The psychologists and psychiatrists have never seen couples in sex. It's hidden and only reported by words. And nobody has words for it. Here we are, with the best kind of accident, stumbling on a couple in daylight, and we don't have the words for it. Is it because we're really afraid to talk about it, or because there aren't any words?"

We stopped at the first thatched cottage. We lifted

the latch at the gate. I didn't answer Lenny. I would rather find out from her face what a woman should look like with a man buried in her to the depth where we all get our soundings. I wanted her breasts in my hands, her tongue reaching for my tongue, that desperate act of lovers to silence words. I wanted her moist, ready, with no preliminaries. I didn't want her riding up and down on me like a runaway wooden pony on a merry-go-round. That I could get on Shaftesbury Avenue for £2. I wanted what she freely gave her husband but what she freely couldn't give me, because a husband, as they say in science and war, is a force to be reckoned with. He would be on her back. And she might throw up her legs to get him off her back, she might roll over trying to force him off, she might rear up, but he would be on her back. I didn't think she could throw him off. Because she wasn't a girl to begin with a man for no good reason. And in marrying Robert, she married him, and whatever the mistakes, she was still with him. And from what she had told me, he was beginning to be dependent on her and few women can resist a man dependent on them.

The cottage was locked. The occupants were probably at the base celebrating the 100 missions. The second cottage was locked. The third cottage was locked.

"I feel like the three little bears," Lenny said. "If the door was open I would go in and taste their porridge."

"It's locked."

"There are terrible laws in England about forced entry. It's funny that England was the country that had so many execution laws. I think something like eight hundred offenses at one time could get you hanged or quartered. At one time we even wanted to make it a crime

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punishable by death to be a pauper. I don't know what it all meant, except it seemed to be designed to keep people in place or out of place." Lenny laughed, taking my hand. "We've come through the woods after seeing two dragons locked in mortal combat to three locked cottages and I'm delivering you a billet-doux on English law."

A jeep came down the narrow road of cottages. I asked Lenny if she wanted to ride back to the base or go through the woods again, over the fence, through the cow pasture, to the Nissen huts.

"I don't think they'll still be there, the smoking dragons. Let's ride. I've never been in a jeep."

We climbed into the back of the jeep, holding on to the seats. The road was rough.

"How's the party going?" I asked the driver, a pfc. who looked familiar. He also looked a little drunk.

"Great," he said, and he looked at me as though I had exhausted the horn of plenty propped up in all of the orderly rooms, the help-yourself carton of condoms.

The jeep passed quickly through the deserted square of the town that led into the ~~air~~ base. We turned into the long road that approached the base, a mile-long road with manor houses, barns, uprooted trees, parked jeeps. The flat air of a base, turned like a pancake out of the English earth. The guard box loomed up. But no guard was on duty today. The base was flung open. We had to move slowly as we entered the base, the roads were crowded with bicycles, jeeps, children running with ice cream cones, men beginning to stagger. The jeep dropped us off in front of my Nissen hut.

"C'mon in," I told Lenny, "you can wash out of a helmet and freshen up."

"Is that the way you do it?"

"No. We've got a latrine. But I haven't seen the latrine they set aside for the girls."

"I'll use a helmet."

"Good."

We entered the hut. Sirota was stoned. The quart jar of 180-proof alcohol was half empty. The beef lay untouched on the mess-hall tray.

"Did you hear the war ended?" Sirota asked us.

"No," I said.

"Neither did I," said Sirota. He laughed, almost vomiting up the 180-proof. He came out of his laughter to offer Lenny a drink of the 180-proof.

"Just a little," Lenny said.

Sirota poured two ounces into a water glass, and gave the glass to Lenny.

"Lenny wants to wash up," I said to Sirota. "Is there a ladies' john open?"

"We can stand guard over the latrine. My mother used to do that when she would take me shopping on 34th Street and I had to use the ladies' room."

"What about the helmet?" Lenny asked.

"I'll fill it with water," Sirota said. "I ought to get out of this hut for a couple of minutes. I've been standing guard over this bottle. I hear the booze is vanishing faster than it can be drunk up."

Sirota made it over to his locker and got hold of his helmet.

"I'll bring it back with pure water."

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Lenny picked up the water glass of 180-proof. She sipped on the drink. I filled half of a water glass with Scotch.

"Cheers," Lenny said. She drank the 180-proof. "It's strong," she said. "My God, it's strong. You can feel it go right through you."

"I ought to bring some into London with me. We discovered it in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is a dry state. That means they don't sell booze. There was a sergeant there who cornered the whisky market. He made more money than two generals. The medics told us about the 180-proof. It's dangerous stuff if you don't cut it properly."

Lenny took more of the drink. I finished the glass of Scotch.

"I needed it," Lenny said, putting down her glass, "just to remember where I'm at."

Her hand reached out to take up mine. She caught my hand in her hands. She rubbed her hands up and down on my hand. There was no one else in the hut.

"What a lot of nonsense we talk." She came at me with her mouth open and I closed my mouth over hers and we found each other's tongues.

Lenny's tongue was cool and sweet, as extraordinary as a lemon I had sucked one day after the end of a long march to nowhere. Who could believe that a lemon could be sweet and cool? And a tongue? Carried in our mouths as effortlessly as our heads on our shoulders. I could feel my tongue in Lenny's mouth, my curled tongue, now stiff, probing, hunting inside of Lenny's mouth, going over the buds, each known to a taste, each bud having a history, and now I was leaving my history on them. What would they retain? One thing, I hoped;

that I had entered her mouth as I had once entered a library in my tenth year, overwhelmed by the rows and rows of books, going in and out of the silent racks, running my hand across the books, knowing even then that I could never read them all but it was enough to know they existed. I would exist forever on the buds of Lenny's mouth. Who has ever forgotten a taste? What was the taste of me? I could only know that Lenny was searching out my tongue, feeling along its edges, digging into its well, going deep into my mouth, swiftly, without fear, as though, if she could, she would descend down into my body, at that bottom of me that we have variously tried to describe with every kind of nonsense. What is it that we are after in knowing?

I reached for Lenny's breast. For that is where our knowledge begins. Lenny had wonderful pear-ripe breasts and I wanted to go under her sweater to see them, but Sirota would come hurling through the door with a helmet full of water. It was good to feel them in my hands, to feel them freely, perhaps as freely as I had ever touched a woman.

Sirota came in with his helmet filled to the top. The water sloshed on the floor. He held the helmet in front of Lenny and she dipped her hands into the water, washing her face clean, and I got a GI towel from my locker. I held the towel ready for Lenny and she wiped herself dry.

"That's good," she said.

Sirota carried the water to the door of the Nissen hut and flung the water on the grass that tried to stay green.

I filled three glasses with drinks, two with 180-proof, one with Scotch.

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"No more for me," Sirota said. "I want to see what happens from now until dawn. The drunks are beginning to multiply outside like rabbits. Another glass of that stuff and the only difference between me and a corpse will be the color of the stuff in my veins."

"It is strong," Lenny said.

"Strong enough," Sirota said, "to make me remember that I'm still in the Army."

Sirota swung back and forth, as though if he stood still the earth would come at him like a steam roller.

"There's a ladies' room open," Sirota said. "It's next to the combat mess hall."

"Is Mildred coming?" I asked.

"No, I called her long distance," Sirota said, as though he was speaking from a long distance. "She has the flu or a cold or maybe she's pregnant; this is the 18th and no period." Sirota took the glass of 180-proof that I offered him. Lenny took her glass. Sirota lifted his glass, and poured the 180-proof into himself.

"If she's pregnant, then I'm a father. If I'm a father then I'm a man. If I'm a man then I'll have to support a wife and a child. And if I support a wife and a child then I have to be able to do something. And right now I can't do a god damn thing. If they let me out of the Army tomorrow I wouldn't know what to do. You hear it every minute and every minute I believe it more and more, *You never had it so good*. I never had it so good. I never did! That's what scares me."

Sirota finished the 180-proof. The whisky snapped his head. "I won't see the dawn," he said, "not unless I sleep. Sack time, sack time." Sirota whirled toward his

bed, falling into his bed, pulling his feet up, curling into sleep.

"He's out," I said. I covered Sirota with a blanket, and I don't think he would have protested if I had put two pennies over his eyes and pronounced him dead.

"He doesn't drink much," Lenny said. "I could see it in his eyes. They seemed to be startled by what was going on behind them. Do you know the girl who's pregnant?"

"I've seen her twice in London. She lives in the East End in a building the bombs ought to hit."

"What does happen when a soldier has a girl who is pregnant?"

"I think marriages are allowed. Sure they are."

"Will Sirota marry Mildred?"

"He might."

"Won't he have to?"

"The CO has to give his permission."

"You mean you can't get married without your Commanding Officer's permission?"

"No."

"But what if you just get married?"

"I don't know what happens. I suppose you stay married or stay in the guardhouse."

"Sirota said something nice. 'I'm nothing. In the morning they can fly me to China.' Is that true?"

"It's true. That the Army can fly him to China in the morning. That he's nothing, I wouldn't say. Sirota likes being alive. That makes him special. Everything he does he does to show that he likes being alive. Except when he drinks and he almost never drinks, then he acts as

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though somebody is getting ready to ask him for his passport. That scares the hell out of him."

"And me." Lenny put down her drink. "Where am I, really?" She walked the length of the Nissen hut, looking at the beds, the blankets pulled taut, the foot lockers, the bits of possessions on the shelf running the length of the hut where the mice came out at night and where the Oklahoman woke up screaming that a field rat was chewing on his throat. Lenny stopped at my bed. I had the bottom half of a double bunk. My bed was in the corner of the hut. She stood by my bed and I hurried past the taut, empty beds, to take Lenny down on the bed with me.

Lenny would have gone down, for she wanted to go under, but the door opened and Golden walked in, startled to see me in the hut with Lenny, for I think both of us had thrown off the war, and we stood there like two civilians, interlopers, relics, perhaps, of an earlier civilization.

Golden quickly saw that my bed was as taut as the others, the blanket undisturbed. I think it pleased him.

"The party's building up," he said. "Two civilians from Stowmarket almost took a B-17 up. They said they wanted to end the war."

"I think we should have a good reason for ending the war," Lenny said, "and not just winning." She said it to make immediate conversation, for Golden stood in the doorway of the Nissen hut as though he had no right to enter. It was his home.

"Can I get anybody a drink?" Golden asked, too loudly. "You need a drink to be out there." He pointed toward the base and walked over to the table in the middle of

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the hut to fill a glass with 180-proof. He drank the 180-proof as though he was refueling his body. "I'm going back out there," Golden said. "I want to be on hand when somebody decides to blow up the ammunition dump."

Golden was drunk. He swayed, reaching for a piece of beef, sticking a whole slice in his mouth, chewing the beef as he filled his glass with more 180-proof.

"Can I lay down and sleep?" he asked. "Will I disturb you? Can you wake me at 8? There's going to be a show in the main hangar. A revue imported from London. I just saw the girls come onto the base. They came in a bus and unloaded from the bus and a mighty cheer went up from the men when they saw the girls, as though the girls were going to be turned naked on the runway and we would all take turns on them, the great sacrificial procreation of World War II. Wouldn't that be a sight for the official war histories? It would be better than those scenes from the World War I movies when the men stopped fighting and climbed out of their trenches and exchanged cigarettes and chocolate bars and then ran back into their trenches. I remember the shelling from the World War I movies. I always told myself in the dark of the movie house that I couldn't take the shelling, that I didn't want to be in a war where they would have that kind of shelling. Well, here I am. I see Sirota is out. I'm going to lay down next to him. Wake me at 8. I don't have a good reason for getting up. Sack time, Sirota calls it. This is our return to the womb. The soldiers return to the womb. There's a good poem for Robert Frost. Excuse me for talking so much. But the sight of a girl in this god damn hut makes me feel that I

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ought to start all over again. I'm getting soft, flabby; every time I pass a door I think I should stick my god damn joint between the door and close the door on it for good."

Golden's voice came at us down half the length of the Nissen hut, fading as he moved further away to his cot at the other end of the hut. Golden slept in the dark corner, silent eight months out of the year.

"What will I say," Lenny asked me, "when I take another glass of the 180-proof? Come on, let's leave it for now. I want to use the ladies' latrine."

We walked out of the Nissen hut, the outbursts of Sirota and Golden, the chill cathedral wetness of the hut, as you walk away from a bishop who has once again reminded you that hell may actually exist and, more frightening, that there may actually be a heaven.

The sky was a magnificent blue. Great clouds circled as though to hide the flights of bombers still engaged in the war. High above at altitudes only the bombers could climb the sky was streaked with the enormous vapor trails of the B-17s. The planes were silvery spread across the sky, imitating the flight of birds. Both Lenny and I were caught by the spectacle of the sky, that dome that sits above us and that all children know as the house of God. The stars still kept their distance, waiting for the night to appear. To remind us that the sky was more vast than the comfortable fleece of the swirling clouds. What if we could fly to a star, and fly forever in the dark night of the sky from star to star, from nebula to nebula, as we fly and flee inside of the closed skin of our bodies? What is there to see, finally?

Lenny I saw. Her face was flushed by the 180-proof.

Her eyes looked as though they were collecting up evidence for a day when the cold dark stars might be the only places of habitation. I think we are always frightened of losing our hold on this world. Maybe in an instant it will all vanish. The great oak trees. The soft earth. The miraculous wheat. The flight of birds. The proportions that seem so right for us. The distance of our heads to the sky. The distance of our feet to the earth. We could just as easily always be walking in a slough of mud. The earth does seem right for us. I have heard myself almost cry out on occasion, *Don't vanish, earth*. It hasn't vanished yet. At least not for the living. And we were all alive this day, as the book said.

I took Lenny to the combat latrine that she entered as though it was the Parthenon.

Outside you could smell the beer and urine, mixed together in the Suffolk soil, like an acid to mark the earth. Perhaps no trees would grow where the beer and urine sank in the soil. Every time the wind blew, the urine was carried upward. The table ramps holding the beer were crowded five and ten deep. Now the men freely pissed, as though the flow of beer gave them the right to join themselves to the earth. Against the side of a Nissen hut, stuck together like two dogs on an August street I fantastically saw, a GI and a London girl stuck to one another, the girl bending over.

"Do you see what I see?" Lieutenant Reans asked me.

Lieutenant Reans was drunk.

"I see it," I said.

"Should we let them finish? Or cheer?"

The question didn't require an answer. The GI shuddered on the body of the London girl. She saw us watch-

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ing and smiled at us as though she had just swallowed mothballs.

"Mission completed," Lieutenant Reans said, and repeated, "Mission completed." He walked away from me, too drunk to reconstruct with words what he had seen, walking as drunken men do, toward nowhere, not recognizing me as the private who wrote up his mission over Mannheim.

"I saw them too," Lenny said, coming up to me, watching Lieutenant Reans walk away. "There must be some babies who will be conceived today, here. I'm sure every woman in England doesn't wear a diaphragm. Maybe the babies will be blessed with a new kind of nervous system, one that doesn't need the diet we feed on."

"Or that we're fed," I said, grandly.

"I hate to make the mistake of thinking I'm different. Come on, let's go back up the road to the runways where the crowds are going."

The road to the runways was jammed. Corporal Hunter, who was supposed to be the best maintenance man on the base, stood by the side of the road hurling packs of Wrigley's chewing gum at the outstretched hands. Lenny caught a pack and put it in the pocket of her skirt. "Wrigley," she said. "I hear that Americans chew thirteen billion sticks of chewing gum a year. Is it so?"

"The only statistic I know is that Americans spend more on booze than they spend to run all of the railroads combined."

"Is America a country you can enjoy?" Lenny asked, midway between the combat mess hall and the briefing

room of the bomber command, the building with the great strategic map of Europe, pins sticking in the map as though Europe was a hexed doll.

"I can't speak for America. I only know it from history books and some quick Army stopovers in Oklahoma, Texas, Ohio, Georgia. America isn't a country. It's a new civilization. It's a civilization where almost everybody is willing to give up everything for security. The insurance companies have usurped everybody and nobody dares make a move without them."

"And what do the people do with their security?" Lenny asked.

"Get more security."

"And finally?"

"The funeral parlors have succeeded in making death unreal, so nobody is really bothered."

"Then it's a dangerous country," Lenny said.

"It is," I said, "but so is everything else."

The Thunderbolts came roaring in over the base, a dozen, screaming in almost over our heads, black, hurling upward, almost wing tip to wing tip. Even Corporal Hunter stopped hurrying gum to look at the planes. They were saluting us. And a salute from a plane meant to do everything but crash the plane, this was the potlatch of warriors. The P-47 could climb 15,000 feet in six minutes, it carried six machine guns, and the six guns firing simultaneously could let loose twenty-seven hundred 50-caliber bullets. We had been promised an air show. I heard the Commanding Officer wanted to have a tow plane tow a target across the sky of our base and have the fighters shoot it out of the sky. One of the adjutants wanted to have a parachute drop. A colonel suggested free rides in

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a B-17 to the cliffs of Dover and back again.

"Fire on one!" cried out Lieutenant Reans. He stood propped up against a jeep at the motor pool. His skin was ash gray. I touched his forehead. It was cold, damp. "Fire on one!" he cried out again. He recognized me. He caught the sight of Lenny and tried to smile, but his eyes, used to the scope of the sky, to the wing-tip distances of formation flying, were narrowing, blacking out. I undid his collar. I held his arm, helping him to slide to the seat of the jeep.

"I'm all right," he said, "as long as nobody wakes me up. Get down to the runways. They're holding a drawing for a B-17. I want one to put in my living room when this fucking war is over." He fell asleep.

"Will he be all right?" Lenny asked.

"He has eight more missions to fly, then he'll be all right."

"Why eight?"

"That will bring his total up to thirty. If a pilot survives thirty missions he's out of the war, if he wants to be."

"Is it an arbitrary figure or did someone figure it out on an actuary basis?"

"I don't know. I never heard why the figure of thirty missions was chosen. Maybe some brain or computing machine arrived at the figure."

"It does give a different character to the war to know that you don't have to go on fighting until you die. But men must go down on their twenty-fifth mission, their twenty-eighth, their final mission. My God, what must it be like to be a twenty-nine-mission pilot, to know that you have to go out one more time against death, to deliver

death and to escape death? Have you known any such men? It's too remarkable. I always thought in war that you went on and on and that your life never really belonged to you. Maybe we're growing up to war. Maybe future wars will be fought like chess games and resolved possibly by computing machines. War loses its meaning when the individual soldier no longer can do the winning—I hope," Lenny said, quietly, as though she was saying good night to Lieutenant Reans' drunken body.

I took Lenny toward the combat mess hall where Dominick said he would be baking pizza in the late afternoon.

Sergeant Dominick had a gallon bottle of chianti resting on the great wooden table where he rolled the dough for his pizza pies. Dominick was from Hartford and he liked to say that if he could teach the Americans to eat pizza he would become rich enough to buy the island of Sicily. In America, Dominick said to me, you only have to succeed, then everything else is easy.

"Wine on top of that 180-proof—I can't," Lenny said.

"It's poured already," Dominick said. "I've been getting drunk since 10 o'clock this morning. I've been saving this bottle of chianti for the end of the war. Now I know the war won't ever end. This is too good to end." Dominick drank from a water glass, slowly, and the chianti looked like blood gurgling into his mouth.

Lenny tasted the wine and said, "This is real chianti! I thought there wasn't any left in England."

"For money there is. This gallon cost me £4/10."

"In Soho," Lenny said.

"Soho," Dominick said. "You know Soho?"

"Some of it."

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"I know some of it too. All of it I don't think anybody knows."

"What part do you know?" Lenny asked.

"If you'll excuse me, I just know a bedroom on Dean Street, a bedroom with white sheets and a mattress 10 inches thick and a toilet that I think nobody uses but me. I know one restaurant, the Dorio, where I eat five times a day when I'm in London."

Dominick bent toward the combat oven. He opened the black iron door and pulled the pizza pie out of the oven.

"Let's eat and drink," Dominick said, "for tomorrow we may still be alive." He took a sharp kitchen knife and dug it into the pie, cutting huge wedges for Lenny and myself.

"Not since Naples," Lenny said, taking the wedge of pizza.

"Naples is where they invented the pizza pie. Bread, cheese, tomatoes, fish if you can catch them, that's the diet in Naples. Naples is the dirtiest city in Europe. Even the churches are dirty. And there are more churches than whorehouses in Naples. This is the new diet, this kitchen, this remarkable kitchen. Look at this kitchen!"

Dominick poured a full glass of wine, drinking half, taking Lenny around the combat kitchen. Dominick stared at his kitchen as though the walls would talk if he ordered them to. Dominick was the No. 1 cook.

"I feed men going off to die," Dominick said, "and I feed them good, so that they won't want to die. I don't think anybody should die fighting the Germans. Do you know what we have in these refrigerators? The finest meats in England. Fresh eggs, chickens, vegetables, fruit,

bacon, ham, the diets tested by scientists, but only human hands can prepare the food. You need a full stomach to fly to Germany and back. And food that you don't want to vomit up. The vomit can clog the oxygen masks. And without oxygen at 20,000 feet you begin to turn black."

Dominick cut two more wedges of the pizza pie. He picked up a huge wedge, folded it over, shoving the pizza into his mouth.

"The oil," he explained to Lenny, "lines your stomach and you can go on drinking and drinking, like a camel. When were you in Naples?"

"Just before the war, 1919."

"You saw Europe then?"

"France, Germany, Italy, Austria, a little of Switzerland."

"I was in Europe in 1919. You could feel Europe getting fat like a pig in the garbage. Nobody wanted war but nobody wanted anything else. Germany made me sick and Italy was a waste of my father's money. He wanted me to see Sicily, Rome, Naples, and Florence. We have family in those four places. The Italians are degenerate when they don't have anything else to do. Not like the Germans, though. The Germans believe in degeneracy. The Italians just practice it. I walked around Naples and I was offered everything but the Virgin Mary. I was just a boy from Hartford who wanted to see the old country. What did you see in Naples?"

"Pompeii, Ischia, the dirty churches, but they didn't look dirty to me, they just looked used up to me."

"You saw more than I did." Dominick emptied his water glass of chianti.

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"Do you make this pizza all the time?" Lenny asked.

"No, this is my memory, you know the way you make pizza, rolling the dough, thin, flat, throwing the dough up into the air, catching it on your hands, never breaking the dough, putting a banquet of tomato paste and cheese on the dough, making a bride of the raw dough. Now I'm drunk, now I'm so drunk that I feel sorry for myself that I'm not in Hartford, when I know that if I was in Hartford, I would want to be every place else. Why are we so crazy? Why are the Germans and Italians so German and Italian? Who persuaded the Italians to join in a fight against the entire world? We can have world wars but I'll bet you that we can never have world peace. I'm a butcher now, you know, not a baker, not a cook. I feed men like they feed them in Sing Sing and this is the room where the cooking is done for the men before they go out to kill. Before the war ends I'm going to go on a mission, to eat one of my breakfasts, to ride in the jeep in the cold morning to the planes, to listen to Major Ba Ba say Munich is the target, to go up in the plane, to see the flak exploding like popcorn, to see Europe from 20,000 feet, to see the German fighters that the gunners say lay in the sky like snakes, to see it all, so I will know it all existed. Do you believe it all?" Dominick asked Lenny.

"I think we have to believe it," Lenny said.

"Don't let this girl go!" Dominick roared at me. "Don't let her go, hold on to her. If she cries make her happy, if she wants to see the sky take her to see the sky, if she wants your life give it to her because she'll only give it back to you." Dominick went down, but not like Sirota and Golden. He went down like a bull, his knees

bending to the floor, holding him up. No matador would have dared approach him. "A gallon of chianti is more than I can drink," Dominick said, "and anything less wouldn't have made me drunk today."

Dominick kept a cot in the kitchen, folded against the wall, ready to catch sack time when he was called up from his sleep to brew coffee. I opened the cot and he lay down on the cot, falling heavily on the cot, but taking a last quick look at his kitchen, so that he would be prepared for his awakening.

Outside flares from the returning Fortresses exploded over Bury St. Edmunds. So there were missions.

"Fireworks would be too much," Lenny said.

The English sky outdid the flares. Great streaks of purple and a dazzling green tore open the Wedgwood blue. Red flares again announced trouble, wounded men. A B-17 rumbled close over us and in the dazzling sky it skirted slowly in a circle, one prop stiff and dead.

"Where are they coming from?" Lenny asked.

"Probably the coast of France. We've been bombing coastal installations for days."

"Why do the Germans keep fighting, now that the air doesn't belong to them?"

"Maybe there's nobody to tell them to stop."

"The sky, the sky, did you ever think we'd be fighting in the sky too? Look at those purples and greens! Do the bombers fly right through those colors? How can they keep their eyes on the targets? And now, with the sun going down, don't they want to fly away and follow the sun? What are men up to?"

Lenny caught my hand, pressing it warm and hard, letting me know that I wouldn't drop into a moist void,

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that her body would yield, catch me in the plunge, hold me, keep me back from what the Englishman called the sulphurous pit. All this with a touch of her hand. What could words finally say?

The sky caught the swarming crowds, and they began to look up at the dazzling streaks of green. The drunken men looked prepared to fall down on their knees and pray.

"What an extraordinary thing it is to be alive," Lenny said, "and there aren't too many occasions to remind you of it. But a sky like this always does. Why?"

"I don't know. Why did the greatest men choose to show their greatness in paint? We respond most to whatever is cut off from time. I think we're always at war with time. We feel greatest when we don't feel time. But why that should be I don't know. A sky like this isolates the sky. Suddenly we know there's a sky above our heads. A real sky. And whatever seems real makes us feel real. It's crazy to try and explain the sky. Only we need an explanation, not the sky."

"And who can do that better than ourselves?" Lenny said, but she smiled as she said it, as though we had both been caught talking in class, behind the teacher's back.

The No. 1 hangar loomed up, rising black and corrugated out of the earth, a vast hulking structure designed to hold four B-17s, now designed to hold a troupe from London.

In the sky, now dark, with flares signaling landings and wounded men, the No. 1 hangar looked like a great tabernacle.

The light was green inside of the hangar, a faint green, as though we were all under water. I couldn't see to the

end of the hangar. It was too vast. But everywhere people stood or sat and looked toward the stage built by the engineers. Along the walls of the hangar the men of the base sat sprawled out, holding bottles of gin, drinking the gin, as though they were wasting time as long as they were sober and conscious. Some fell forward, curling up in sleep. The chairs were occupied by the men from the towns, the women, and the men of the base, officers and enlisted men, who sat stiff and expectant, as though they were going to be entertained.

Sergeant Thomas, Tom Thomas, called to me from his squatting position against the wall of the hangar. He held up a bottle of Johnny Walker, half full. He swirled the whisky in the bottle, offering it to me and Lenny. I took a swallow of the Johnny Walker, and Lenny held the bottle to her mouth but she didn't swallow. She only said, "The chianti."

"When am I going to get my DFC, Pfc.?" Thomas asked me. Thomas wasn't drunk. He told me he could never get drunk because then he'd never be able to get sober. He said he just felt comfortable with a fifth of Scotch. Thomas was a tail gunner.

"It's yours already," I told him.

"You need the Medal of Honor to get ten bucks a month extra, don't you?" he asked.

"That's right."

"What do I get with the DFC?"

"Just the DFC."

"What's the DFC?" Lenny asked.

"Distinguished Flying Cross," I told her.

"I got it for shooting down two German Messerschmidts," Thomas told Lenny. "It was pure luck. I was

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looking at a rainbow, a real one hung up in the sky. These two guys came right out of the rainbow. I started firing as soon as I saw them and they both exploded. They didn't disturb the rainbow but they shook me up. When you sit in the tail where I was sitting and if you're in the last plane of the last formation, you begin to think you're the last of the last. Do you know who I'd like to talk to? That tail gunner who was in the B-17 that blew up and the tail section came free and the wind currents caught the tail, and carried it like a leaf down to the earth, falling 15,000 feet. What else could he believe in but God, the devil, and the whole thing?"

Thomas held up the Scotch.

"More?" he asked Lenny.

"No," Lenny said.

"You're not sober?" he asked Lenny. "I can't tell because I'm high. You can't be sober here today. Not unless you're Isaiah. Watchman, watchman, what of the night? The earth is polluted! The inhabitants have broken the everlasting covenant, the inhabitants of the earth are burned and few men are left. I saw Munich burning! Hamburg burning! Nuremberg burning."

The Johnny Walker dropped from Thomas's hand. He looked at the spilled whisky as though he would lick it up from the floor of the hangar.

Thomas got up from his squatting position against the wall of the hangar. He was tall, almost too tall to be a tail gunner.

"I've killed two men," he told us, "and I think I've got a right to go back to my hut and finish a bottle that I haven't started yet. Let me shake your hand," he told Lenny. "Not every girl can listen to me talk so long with-

out getting a stupid dumb grin on her face. There isn't a girl in America who knows how to listen to a man talk. All they want to do back there is to figure out how to get through life without a pair of balls. And if you gave them balls they wouldn't know what to do with them. But you have to forgive the drunken soldier," Thomas said to Lenny, "as Jesus forgave the guys who nailed him to the cross. Do you think he did? Or did he know he was going to live forever? And if he knew he was going to live forever what the hell was so great about his dying? I know I'm going to die but the minute I believe it I get so panicky I want to do everything else but die."

Thomas let go of Lenny's hand. He was down in the dark green water where the meeker fish stare at you, and the braver fish begin to nibble at the soft jelly of your eyes.

"What's on the stage there?" Thomas suddenly asked.

A searchlight blinded us. We turned and saw the curtains part. A five-piece orchestra blared "God Save The King," "The Star Spangled Banner," the "Warsaw Concerto." A tall thin man in a silining tuxedo flung open his arms to the audience and cried out, "We have a show for you!" He pointed to the wings of the curtain. A naked girl with enormous breasts, naked to her breasts and her shaved hair, walked slowly out, her hips swinging slightly to the left and right, the drum picking up the *hup, two, three* of marching, and as she got to the center of the stage the orchestra broke into "Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder" and the girl (whoever she may have been) began whirling her breasts like the props of a Fortress and the audience began yelling and stamping

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and cheering her on and as they yelled the master of ceremonies began giving her items of clothes, a pair of stockings, underpants, a hat, a bra, that she put back on as though to prove she was really a woman.

The yelling lasted for about five minutes. The MC didn't try to stop the yelling. He called back the girl and she lowered her bra and lifted one breast out and blew a kiss over the top of her breast toward the screaming audience. I thought the front rows would break for the stage and drag her off into the hangar. The MC cried, "Boys, you really haven't seen anything yet!"

The yelling tapered down. The music rushed in. Three girls, a blonde, a redhead, and a black brunette, wearing GI fatigue pants, their breasts naked, their arms linked, came out dancing, and the yelling from the audience drowned the music. The girls kicked their feet upward revealing black bloomers in the crotch of their fatigue pants.

Thomas tried to yell above the roaring voices, "We're all dead and this is the heaven of the Koran!"

I heard him because he yelled it in my ear.

"What?" Lenny asked.

"Dead!" Thomas yelled out again.

"Head?" Lenny asked.

The naked girls kicked to a stop in the center of the stage, bending forward, their breasts shaking. They unlinked their arms and took hold of their breasts as though they were full of milk and they were going to squeeze their nipples directly into the front rows of the screaming GIs.

"We're going to form a GI line and suck their tits!" Thomas yelled out.

The girls squeezed their nipples. The GIs howled. But no milk gushed.

The screaming audience took up the cry. Harder! harder! harder!

The cry lasted until the girls whirled off the stage. The MC rushed forward.

"Paris!" he cried out.

The drummer beat a call to arms.

"Paris!" the MC cried out again.

The drummer was joined by the trumpet player. The two blasted out the "Marseillaise."

"Freedom!" the MC cried out.

The stage went dark. A spotlight picked out a girl in a white flowing gown. The trumpet player followed her movements with the "Marseillaise," the drummer beating in the background, a rumbling beat. The audience went silent. The great hangar was black. The girl leaped and twirled, her body following the trumpet, for the trumpet is remorseless in demanding freedom. I almost expected to see her body leap across the heads of the GIs, to fly in the great reaches of the hangar, to twirl like a magical top, for each of us to pick her up in the palm of our hand, to feel her whirling, the top that tells little boys that it's possible to spin and stand still, to accept for an instant, the sphere.

The trumpet stopped sharply as though it had found freedom and didn't know what to do with it.

The girl whirled to the center of the stage. She flung her hands up and outward like the winged victory. Her dress fell from her shoulders. She stood fantastically naked. A solid curved undulating naked body.

A solid roaring rose in the hangar like an avalanche

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and rushed toward the naked body and buried her in a roaring that must have had its origin in the creation of the world.

The roaring didn't stop. Waves of roaring roared over the hangar. The girl didn't move. She stood in the center of the stage, naked, white, her arms still flung out, certainly one of the most extraordinary sights in the history of recorded warfare. And what it meant I couldn't guess. I looked toward Thomas to see what he would say. But like me he only stared. I looked at Lenny.

Lenny smiled at me. But a smile that made the naked body on the stage look like what it was, a simple naked body.

The London girl looked bewildered on the vast stage. The roaring of the men grew louder with the stamping of feet. *More! more! more!* became the cry. More of what, the girl's face looked. The men rose from their seats. Now they were linked. *More! more! more!* The girl didn't know what to do on the stage. She pulled back into the depth of the stage as though the roaring airmen were going to claim her for a sacrificial victim. She had been impaled before on London beds. But not by a thousand roaring airmen. What if she lay back on the stage, held up her legs and let them enter her one by one, like a massive short-arm?

Lenny caught the demand. She stood up looking at the roaring airmen, the searchlights booming across their heads, as though this was one of those deep pits that the earth sometimes opens up for us.

Lenny took a long look. As we look at the Grand Canyon. As though it won't exist unless we remember it. She turned from the roaring men to tell me, "They

all want to do it to her. That's what I see. And if they did would the roaring die down to the quiet domesticity of dropping bombs on Munich? Who made us? And don't tell me that we made ourselves. Don't tell me that I won't be me until the last syllable of recorded time and even beyond it. I don't blame them for roaring. I don't!"

Lenny's mouth was on mine. We sank down on the floor of the hangar, kissing each other as though nobody was present but our desire to bite and suck our way into one another. When we got up from the floor of the hangar, we were ready to leave for the Nissen hut.

The MC called more naked girls out of the recess of the hangar. They seemed to be as numerous as nuts and bolts. Just as we stepped out of the green light of the hangar, ducking a huge sweeping beam, we heard more roaring. We turned and saw a tableau on the stage. A dozen naked girls had formed a pyramid of bodies piled on one another and two comedians in baggy pants were scurrying around the pyramid miming the best entrance into the pyramid.

The sky was black. Immediately black. The moon was fat and round. A buzzing roared in the sky, a red buzzing, a hungry buzzing. We saw a doodlebug hurling across the sky for no target except the earth where it would fall. The Germans were sending the bombs across the Channel, bombs built like pilotless airplanes, filled with tons of explosives, designed to effortlessly destroy England. The buzz bomb was the weapon children imagine when they want the earth to vanish. It was possible that ten thousand of them an hour hurling across the sea could destroy London and England. But the bombs

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came infrequently, almost haltingly, like the first bombing planes. When the buzzing stopped it meant the bomb had reached the end of its flight and it would fall on whatever target lay beneath. The bomb selected its victims with the impassivity of nature. The bomb didn't cut out over us. It sped on, a fat, lazy bug in the sky. The night fighters sometimes shot them out of the sky. And more often they fell in empty fields. But they were falling on London. And when they fell, people died.

We watched the bomb go deeper into the sky. Searchlights began hunting the bomb. In an instant the sky was filled with gunfire. The lumbering bug exploded into artifact, to be studied in the year 2000 A.D. by Suffolk schoolboys. Who would have believed in 1000 A.D. that men in 1919 A.D. would be sending up hunks of flying bombs to fall on cities? Probably everyone.

The hangar was blacked out. Only its hulk was visible. No lights were visible on the base. I didn't need to use my flashlight on the road leading to the hut. I knew the road. It wound from the vast hangar past the motor pool of jeeps and trucks, past the headquarters hut with the orders of the day, past the combat mess hall where Dominick lay drunk, into the compound of huts. In the dark we passed GIs going down on girls in parked jeeps, bending over them, some of the girls taking on the GIs in a London stand-up. 'All around us drunken men rolled and staggered and some fell by the side of the road, to sleep.

Lenzy said, "None of it is true." The moon showed us that it was true. A night bomber rushed overhead. The searchlights were in the sky, combing the sky, converging on the bomber.

"Will he die now too?" Lenny asked.

"Unless he jumps."

"Will they shoot him if he jumps?"

"It depends on the gun crew."

The German bomber pilot didn't elect to jump. His plane exploded.

"I tried to follow," Lenny said, "for an instant his life line. I think we ought to stop being what we are and do what we can. Let's go." Lenny caught my hand and we began hurrying along the road, not stopping now to look at the black sky, the black road, the staggering bodies, the arc of the base, now hidden under the blackout. No more apt phrase had ever been invented during a war than blackout.

But the moon couldn't be blacked out. And the stars persistently hung, great clusters of them, giving no light but marking off the dimension of available eternity.

The stars were frightening. The great white judges of time and distance. There they hung. Immediately above our heads. It was like crying "Speak!" into a deserted cathedral, but what walls of a cathedral have ever spoken except the whispering walls of St. Paul's, and then they only return your words. I caught hold of Lenny, her arms went around me and she pressed herself into me, and we kissed, this time only on the lips, and a kiss, I realized, was the way we yield to our helplessness.

The Nissen hut was blacked out. Lenny and I entered. No lights were on in the hut. We turned into my corner of the hut, toward my bed, the cot covered with two Army blankets. Lenny sat down on the bed and I pulled back the blankets. The sheets were pulled taut. I loosened the sheets.

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Lenny said, "Now." She pulled me over to her on the Army bed and we turned into the bed, facing each other.

"A bed," she said.

"An Army bed," I said.

"A bed," Lenny said again. She sat up, her hands going to her hair, and she loosened her hair, letting it fall like an offering. I pulled up her cashmere sweater. Lenny's hands undid her brassiere. I bent over, taking off Lenny's shoes. Lenny slid down her skirt. She lay naked.

I bent over the offering, as naked as Lenny. Lenny lifted herself toward me. I went into her. Lenny pressed toward me. I went into her as far as my body could take me. Lenny pulled her legs up, tightening them over my back. My mouth sank on her mouth. And if we had pressed our fingers deep in each other's ears and sealed our nostrils we would have sealed all of the open holes of our bodies.

We lay locked like a mythic creature until the need for air brought the mythic creature down to the GI pillow. Lenny broke her mouth away from mine and sank her teeth into my shoulder. I lifted my body to sink myself again but Lenny held me off until she caught her breath again and then she laid her head back on the pillow and let me look into her face, her face pained to the expectancy of finding again the mythic creature, the face women always turn away or that men don't dare look at. I looked at Lenny's face. It wasn't pain. But pain was there. What I saw was music. Music unscored, not written, not played, no concert hall, no men in evening suits, no conductor. But music. The breaking point of music. The silence that is as much of

music as the sounds that require so much apprenticeship. The pain was the silence. The awesome silence we all fear. And we must fear it. And for a woman this must be the fear. Not to hear the music after the silence. And until the music breaks, the silence is too overwhelming and you can only contort your face into a scream, a frozen scream, for to scream out loud would drown out the music if and when it comes.

I saw Lenny's face as she rose up in the GI cot to grab me and bring me down into her. Her eyes shining, her nostrils flared, her lips wet, full, her face triumphant. For what is it that music does except make us feel that we ought to live after all? The triumph is that we want to live.

I pulled my Army blanket over us, not to sleep, for the cock might crow in the form of my captain, but to feel the GI blanket over us; billions of sheep must have been sheared on the plains of Argentina to provide the wool for the millions and billions of GI blankets. And not only the GI blankets but the billions of GI shirts, GI pants, the GI coats, the GI hats. It was worth pondering, even with Lenny naked against me, her hand stroking me and my hand following the extraordinary curve of her hips, that the war gave a billion and a half people a purpose.

I turned from the purpose of war to Lenny, knowing that I would have to at least solve the purpose of war if I was to continue living in the twentieth century. For war dominated the twentieth century and we are in turn dominated by the century we live in. And we miss the excitement of the century if we in turn don't try to dominate it. With Lenny I didn't know what I wanted,

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except now she had roused me to rise over her again and when she closed her legs over me I was in. I lay still for a moment, as though mapping out the boundary, and then I began the exploration of that infinite space, the tactile universe, with all of its tactile remembrance, not the sulphurous pit of the Englishman, the hungry yaw of the Frenchman, but a universe open for exploration, that seemed put into our bodies to rouse us to wonder.

Lenny grasped what I was trying to do, for she aided me by making her body available and parts of her that I hadn't touched came under my touch, a heavy sweetness, like the weight of a mountain on a meadow, and way deep inside of her there was a swift running stream that I entered like a ceremonial bath and the stream ran over me, breaking over me like a falls, and the stream began to rage and the surging water swept my feet from under me and I was flung into the raging stream like the tin soldier. I entered the mouth of history. Why did Sirota tell me his history? Sirota five, his brother seven, asking questions that nobody has answered except ourselves. "Where do we come from?" "God." "Did God make all of us?" "Yes, God made everybody." "God made everything?" "The rain, the clouds, the trees, the wind, the moon, the sun, the sky, the birds, everything you can think of, dummy, except the kitchen table." "God made all the people?" "I told you God made everybody!" "Then who made God?" "God made himself." "That's pretty tricky." "Well God can do it." "How can God make himself?" "That's a deal God has that we haven't figured out yet." Sirota said that when he was ten everybody told him that one day he would grow

up to be a man. And he believed them all. When he was eleven he suddenly saw that all of the people in the world were different. When he was fourteen there was a girl on East 119th Street and Second Avenue who was letting boys stick it in her for three pennies. He rushed to find three milk bottles and exchanged the milk bottles for the girl. When he was six he went to the Bronx Zoo. He looked at the tigers, the lions, the bears, the rattlesnakes, the zebras, the camels, the wolves, the seals. He went to the cage of the gorilla. A lot of people stood in front of the gorilla laughing at the gorilla. He looked at the gorilla without laughing. Sirota pushed closer to the cage. The gorilla noticed Sirota. The gorilla pointed his finger directly at Sirota. Sirota was afraid to move. He stood alone in front of the gorilla cage. The gorilla lifted his finger again, this time there was no mistake, he meant for Sirota to come closer. A moat separated the bars from where Sirota stood trembling. The gorilla leaped to the platform in his cage, he pounded on his chest, he leaped to the floor of the cage, springing in front of the bars, he leaped back to the platform and then sprang to the floor, roaring up to his full enormous height in front of Sirota. "Hello," Sirota tried to say. Sirota said, "Gorilla." Sirota said, "Hello, gorilla." The gorilla heard. The gorilla put his hand on his ear. Sirota put his hand on his ear. The gorilla put his hand on his knee. Sirota put his hand on his knee. The gorilla put his hand on his head. Sirota put his hand on his head. Sirota smiled. The gorilla smiled back at Sirota. Sirota said he heard not even Moses saw God. That God came in a bush, in lightning. He heard that Jesus was dead and then came to life, that his mother was a virgin

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and his father not his father, and that Jesus was not Jesus but God and some people saw him in B.C. but nobody has seen him in A.D. He heard from Mrs. Sears on a hot winter afternoon on East 112th Street that babies were born when the sperm and the egg united and formed a cell and the cell began growing and dividing and one cell if its genes so ordered could grow larger than the earth. Mrs. Sears told him that the center of the earth was molten. That mountains lay under the ocean. That there were men in Africa who slept standing on one leg. That the earth was a ball of fire, then it cooled, then rains came for fifty million years, then life came from the falling rain and trees grew to be 500 feet tall and jungles covered the earth. Then ice came for fifty million years and rivers of ice ripped up the earth and then, for no reason except the reasonable reason that God needed somebody to talk to, life began, our life, real life, this life, cells with the intricacy of grammar, and they began the long journey to find the shortest way to an explanation of where we go when we die. For death is the mouth of history. What are we to do with history? Who told Sirota's brother that God created himself? Why did an eleven-year-old girl lie down for three empty milk bottles? Why did the gorilla smile at Sirota? Why was the earth a ball of fire? Then a rain cloud? Then ice? Didn't a Minoan lady of the court lift her legs as Lenny had them around me? Didn't the Pompeians paint pictures on their walls of surfeited women with elongated legs outspread and men arching between their legs kissing them into further surfeit? Did the owners of the Pompeian houses request the paintings? Why in two billion years hasn't a single man returned

from death? Or a flea? Or a chipmunk? And what if a man and not a mammoth had been encased in ice and slowly thawed on a Russian plain? Why does a man gasp when he plows himself into a woman? He wouldn't gasp as much if he pulled a plow up a Galilean hill. What would I have to say to Ikhnaton? What would Lenny say to me when she rose from under me? Her limbs were miraculously wound around me, cushioning me as my mother had carried me. Did an angel tap me on the forehead just as I came out of my mother, making me forget all there was to learn? Did I scratch myself in my mother? Get hungry for food? Kick my feet when fed? Do women really carry babies in their stomachs? Was I making a baby now? For I wore no covering. And Lenny. Did she place a sponge deep in herself before she left her flat in the morning for the Liverpool Street Station? Or in the combat latrine? I felt no sponge. I reached for Lenny's tongue. It was sweet. Her tongue caught hold of mine. This is what babies know before they're born! Her tongue! Her tongue! I hung onto Lenny's tongue. Lenny's teeth caught my tongue. She bit into my mouth. She caught my tongue full in her mouth. She sucked in my tongue. My tongue with words. Lenny had my tongue. She sucked on my tongue. She had me now. She let me deeper into her. She was letting me return. Robert wasn't on her back. I grabbed her miraculous body. And we both reared and rose out of the sea as did the fish a billion years ago.

I slept on Lenny, knowing I was asleep, which is the most wonderful sleep of all. But my captain didn't think so.

"Everybody has fifteen minutes more! Then all out.

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everybody out!" cried Sergeant Howe. "Fifteen minutes, then everybody out!" He pounded on the door of the Nissen hut to make certain that we heard him. I heard a rustling in the hut and realized that Lenny and I weren't alone.

Lenny laughed. "If I dared to tell Nora this she would envy me for the rest of my life."

Sergeant Golden cried out in the hut, his voice drunken and hurt, "Time, ladies and gentlemen, time, please, time, Eastern Standard Time, it's 7:15 in Hong Kong."

Sergeant Howe pounded on the door again. "Fifteen minutes! The captain said fifteen more minutes!"

Lenny pulled the GI blanket away from her. She lay naked, her body white in the light that came through the meshed window, the blackout curtain pushed aside. She rose up at me, smiling.

The jeeps and the six-wheeled trucks were running a taxi service to the station, the drivers as drunken as pinwheels. Lines of girls were piling into the vast trucks.

Lenny put her tweed coat over her shoulders. I carried a musette bag filled with the unobtainable roast beef, cans of Dole pineapple, unobtainable fresh oranges and bananas, bars of Hershey chocolate, my ration of Chesterfield cigarettes, a hundred Gem blades for Robert, a half-pound tin of Edgeworth's.

"Can we walk to the station?" Lenny asked. "I would rather."

"I can get off the base. Nobody needs a pass until tomorrow."

"What time does the war officially begin again?"

"Probably tomorrow evening when the battle order

comes over the teletype."

"Sleep, sleep, and may lots of angels carry you to rest."

A mist was collecting. A bank of fog was beginning to move in on the base. The station was a mile away, down the road past the Three Nuns pub, thatched cottages, two big houses that always looked shuttered. The trucks rolled past us, the sputtering jeeps. Ahead we could see the fog waiting for us, heavy, clinging to the silhouetted trees, moving to the ground, thick swirls of fog, obscuring the sky. The full moon gave color to the fog, white, a thick white, that we began to enter, stepping into the thick whiteness.

"The London train," Lenny said. "I feel like I'm going into Venice. I went to Venice once during the winter. The fog comes in off the Adriatic. The rooms are all wet, dank, unless you can get a roaring fire. The streets are wet, deserted, the fog setting on those fantastic chimney pipes. It's the most wonderful kind of death I can imagine, to be dead in Venice in the winter. The gondoliers sweeping their oars through the mist. Robert and I went there. He had two weeks' work to do in Venice. He worked and I just wandered through the streets stopping to drink coffee in cafés where the men looked at me with that bold Italian look that fails them when they leave Italy. I hate the fog in London. The London fog has only one purpose, to make you want to run from London. The fog frightens me in London. The streets get all bundled up. You begin to whirl around. You get desperate when you realize that you can't find your flat, let alone Regent Street, though you know it's out there, big as life. I think Robert may be

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waiting for me at Liverpool Street Station. Do you think I should take that musette bag home filled with what he calls American goodies? I don't want to fight with him over it."

"Do you have to go home to him?"

"Where else would I go?"

"To Nora's?"

"I have to go home to him, at least this time. I told him when I expected to be back. He likes train stations, that's why he may be waiting for me at Liverpool Street Station. He's still fascinated by the people sleeping on the Underground platforms. When he came back from Africa he used to look around at all of the platforms where the people slept, piled up in tiers, their little night bags of belongings. He wanted us to try it, not to escape the bombs, for you can't, he would say, but to join the twentieth century. He says this is the way we'll live from now on, in shelters, whether they're Underground platforms or specially built, or just inside of our minds. We spent one night on an Underground platform, carrying our own little night bag of belongings, a sleeping bag. The trains roared by. How quickly the people on the platform made it normal. We could see little pockets of life on the platform, the people adapted and accustomed to the platforms, and niceties, like an East End tailor coming over to us and saying, 'Glad to have you here with us, pleasant good night to you, you'll see the blue sky in the morning, you will.' I will never forget the sight of the London sky when we crawled out of the platform into the daylight. The barrage balloons piled up in the sky held by their slender and dangerous leashes. I felt I had been asleep for a thousand years.

Maybe the Gem blades and the Edgeworth will keep him quiet. He can't call me a tart if he accepts the blades. I just don't want to fight with him about this." Lenny turned her head toward the base, now buried under the blackout and fog, the fog thick behind us. "But we'll fight. We've been married long enough to fight about it. But let that happen when it does. I like this fog. Maybe because it means the planes can't fly in it. You see, we're all at war."

We stopped on the road and kissed. Lenny clung to me, as the fog clung to us, cold, wet, coming as it did, to obscure the world, a landscape that had no boundary.

The fog lifted at the station and we could see the tracks stretched toward London.

"You're not far from Yorkshire here," Lenny said, "nor any part of England. It must seem small to you after America. Not now, but I would like to know what you think of England. I keep thinking, now that I'm here, that I'm English and I wonder if it makes a difference. But no, you know Nora. Poor Nora, she's the kind of woman that when she's dead everybody will say they knew her with the kind of camaraderie that you get in a stalled lift. And me. I want you to care about what happens to me."

Lenny deliberately took up the musette bag. The London train announced itself with a piercing cry. The train was blacked out and hurled toward the platform in gusts of steam. Lenny hurried toward the platform. The train braked to a stop. I pulled open the compartment door.

"My God," Lenny said, "what will I think about in this compartment!"

14

Nora wrote: My God, what did you do to Lenny? Please send me a £4 advance on your room. I am broke. And though £4 won't make me less broke it will at least mean that I have some money coming in. Augustus John promised to buy an oil from me and that will mean at least £25 and all in cash. You must plan your next leave to come with me to the opening of the London Painters' show. I will be showing an oil of Lenny. The one you like. And it can be yours for £35. Robert didn't beat up Lenny. If I have any other news I'll write but you must send me the £4.

I wrote a fifteen-page letter to Buber about the 100-mission party and Sirota told me that our captain held the letter for ten days.

Buber wrote from New York: Keep a copy of your 100-mission letter. I can't be trusted to hold on to letters. I finally decided to take a job with a publishing house. I go in to work at 11 o'clock. This is a concession they make to me because I asked for it and I seem to be the only male around who isn't a fag. I stay in bed reading because I decided that's the way I'm going to make my living, writing about other people. It's a son of a bitching thing to do but America is a country for critics and not writers. And if you can't fight them, join them. I tried

to write a novel when I was 31 and realized that it was a total and hopeless mistake. Good novels are only written by people who write them because they realize that if they don't write them nobody else will. And so the world goes on. I keep getting blown, which is the only pleasure I find that has immediate results. As for Lenny, I told you before, there are no ground rules. She has a husband and that may make it hard or simple for you. Remember what I said, don't pass up Nora. She only comes along once and though once may be enough with her for some people, I don't think it is for you. I keep giving you advice when you should be giving me advice. I don't think you should concern yourself too much with war as war. Nobody gives a shit about the number of people killed or the buildings bombed. Any decent population increase after the war will quickly replace fifty million dead. And the bombed buildings will just give jobs to people. The thing to be concerned about is whether we can hang on to our balls or whether we'll just hang them up to dry out. War for me always means fear, fear of facing up to decisions. It's wonderful to see how quick we all are to take orders. Even girls who I never thought would blow me, do it, probably for the same reasons. When we all start taking orders (which is the drift of the modern world), then nobody will be making decisions, and then we will see old man evolution take over the human race.

15

Nora looked dazzling in the great rooms of the Royal Academy. She pointed to her small brick-red portrait of Mrs. Poole and told me Augustus John had given her £25 for it.

“And in cash. Lovely cash. I’m still thrilled by selling a picture. And I must make this money last. I can’t think of another picture I’ll paint or another person in this century who will give me £25 for a painting within a fortnight. I’m giving you an option on the big painting of Lenny. You’re the only person who should own it.”

Nora’s face was scrubbed. Her fingernails were clean. She wore the nylon stockings I had brought her. She was sober and not only sober from drinking but sober as she would like herself to be. She stood straight. Even her teeth looked clean. She pointed at the pictures on the wall with the authority of a painter, seeing faults and virtues I couldn’t see. I only looked at paintings to see if the painter was cheating.

“If you go to Cornwall you can look up Nicholson and Tunnard and Eddington. They’re real painters. St. Ives is filled with the idiots who practice painting. Fifty years ago St. Ives was one of the most beautiful spots on earth, at least our man-made earth. Now it’s become ugly by people. But it’s worth seeing. Land’s End will never

change. Penzance is one of those places that have fame. I love the way fame sticks to people and places. I'll be in all of the art history books because I boozed with Modigliani. A few German bombs might have made a charming ruin out of St. Ives. Are you going to buy my picture of Lenny?"

"I am."

"Let's stick a star on it. A star," Nora called out. She went up to the catalogue of the show and ran a thick black pencil line through the listing of Lenny's portrait.

Leming walked into the gallery, flapping like a penguin, his tweed jacket, his gray flannels too big for his frame.

"So there you are," he said to me. "Why didn't you invite me to that 100-mission party? From the little I've heard about it English history will have to be rewritten."

"The corporal just bought a painting of mine."

"Why not, Nora? You're just about the best painter on these walls. You don't look like your paintings and that's the only way I can tell if a painting is good. Why don't you go drinking with me through the East End of London?" Leming asked me. "I can show you pubs that will make Restoration England seem like Macy's. They're a strange breed of Englishman in those East End pubs. Only one other Englishman looked at them, Arthur Morrison. I suppose you have them in America, strange pubs and stranger men. After the war Nora and I are coming to America on a lecture tour."

"I did get drunk on Commercial Road."

"That's still in the middle of the town, as they say. I mean deep down in the East End where you keep descending one sewer after another and you wade through a

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stinking bunch of bodies and they're all busy, that's the extraordinary thing, they seem to have nothing to do except sit in pubs, yet they're full of animation, busy little actions and endless conversations and the most fantastic thing is that they listen to one another. I'll pick you up at the Dog and Duck one night. You can give the ladies a rest. An American soldier like you might give them conversation for another ten thousand years."

"He's going to Cornwall," Nora told Leming.

"Not alone! Don't go to Cornwall alone!" Leming told me.

Lenny entered the gallery. I had been looking for her, watching the stream of people enter the gallery, the London stream, those faces lined by art, weathered by the Dog and Duck, the Café Royal, the glimpses of identity, sometimes too frightening to pursue further.

Lenny waved to me.

"No, you won't go it alone," Leming said.

"The firm gave me two hours for lunch if I promise to do an errand for them on Regent Street," Lenny told us.

"Good," Nora said, "we've been promised lunch at the Café Royal and I promise not to vomit up my chicken again."

"I'm going," Leming said, "to see what English art has to say about the most terrible conflagration in the middle half of the twentieth century. Nothing, I hope."

Leming moved away, disappointed, I think, that I couldn't take advantage of his interest in me.

Nora smiled at me, for she had the soundings of a bat.

"He writes," Lenny said, "with the kind of genius that needs genius."

We moved toward Lenny's portrait. The face on the canvas was three-quarter, and like all good portraits, it held together, not because it was Lenny, but because Nora had managed to fill the space with the extraordinary quality of painting, which is to suggest that the depth we create with our eyes is real.

"Paul bought it!" Nora told Lenny.

I caught a hurt look in Lenny, as though for an instant she sensed that I had settled for the painting, and not her.

But the look may have been in me and not in Lenny, for Lenny took my hand and said, "Possession is nine-tenths of the law."

"You don't want me at lunch, do you?" Nora asked. "I can lunch with Leming on the head of a salted codfish. You don't need a key, Paul, the flat's open."

Nora didn't wait for me to insist that she eat lunch with us at the Café Royal. She quickly moved into the midst of the gallery, catching up with Leming, who welcomed her, and together they looked like those strewed Roman ruins, their original purpose lost.

"It's good to see you," Lenny said, "so good."

It was the first time we had seen each other since the 100-mission party. I couldn't get off the base. Emergencies rose with the expected invasion of Europe. The sky was filled with planes shuttling back and forth to Germany. I kept feeling the war would end, that the invasion wouldn't be necessary. A thousand planes a night were bombing Germany. But the Germans gave no indication of peace and no cry of enough came from Germany. Not a single voice came across the Channel. Hitler still seemed to be in complete command. It was

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Hitler who made the war unreal. The war wasn't a war against Hitler. It was a war to see how far war would go. The combined British and American air forces were in a position to drop a billion bombs on Germany. And Hitler, if he wanted, could fill his buzz bombs with gas and bacteria. I took hold of Lenny's hand, which was a way of getting rid of the war.

"Let's not eat at the Café Royal," Lenny said. "It's too posh for me today."

We left the gallery, going toward Regent Street, the massive target buildings of the West End. The West End streets were empty for London. The traffic spotted. Only people with business seemed to be on the sidewalks, hurrying.

"The buzz bombs," Lenny said.

I looked up at the London sky, as others did, for the fat vulgar flying bombs. I found myself listening to the sky.

Lenny completed her errand on Regent Street, and we caught a cab, stopping at an Italian grocery on Old Compton Street. I bought salami, olives, a bottle of available Marsala, cheese, a twisted bread, and a cake. We rode on to Nora's flat.

Nora's room remained unchanged. The afternoon light gave the room dignity. The photograph of Modigliani shone on the fireplace mirror like an ikon. Nora's papers were piled up in the fireplace as carelessly as the ruins of a picnic. On the easel was a painting Nora had started months ago, and no work had been done on it. Lenny studied the painting for an instant and then sat down on the sagging studio bed that Nora rented to me for £1 a week. I opened the bottle of Marsala.

"To Nora," Lenny said. "She looked good today. She

can when she wants to. I suppose that's the advantage of a good upbringing."

"Augustus John gave her £25 for a painting."

"I know. He's known Nora for twenty-five years. He likes her work. He wouldn't buy it if he didn't."

I made Lenny a huge sandwich of salami and cheese. "At home they call these hero sandwiches."

"Do you write home often?"

"Once a week."

"To whom?"

"My mother."

"And your father?"

"He died a year ago."

"Oh. Of what?"

"Complications with water in his system."

"My parents are both dead. I have a grandmother who lives on and on in Helston. I think it's the Cornish air. But it didn't help my parents. My father went quickly, so quickly it seemed as though he had never lived. I have trouble remembering him now. I always thought when and if my parents died I would have all kinds of little remembrances. That's supposed to be one kind of immortality, what other people remember of you. I do remember my mother. She liked to sit in front of a fire and rock and look into the fire as though hell was the most familiar place for her on earth. My father left us his name and very little else. My mother's funeral was nice. Almost the entire street of our Cornish town showed up, and they have the most wonderful burial grounds. I think the people in the village look forward to being buried there. It's high up, you can see the sea, the village below, the fishing nets, the long boats. And the

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Cornish sky is like the eternity the ministers talk about. What led us to Cornish cemeteries?" Lenny held out her glass for more Marsala.

"The hero sandwiches."

"I know now why. When I hear of something new I find myself wondering if it will make a nice small business for Robert, where he can attend to the customers, and see the money effortlessly come in. My mother spent her life searching for a nice small business with an effortless income so that we could all get a nice university education. She believed in education the way the Americans do. She even sometimes thought of emigrating to America. The English quota is never filled. Even Robert sometimes talks of emigrating to America. Do we always marry our parents?"

"You know what Brooks Adams said. The English or somebody in the 1600s or earlier took marriage away from the church and made it a business contract. From then on the family became an economic unit. Marriage a contract. Later on the novelists invented love." I was getting high on the Marsala and didn't know what I was saying. I saw Lenny on Nora's sagging studio bed. I heard her talking about her mother's Cornish burial, and I wondered why we weren't already in bed and why she was holding me off. The bottle of Marsala was half gone and the hero sandwiches eaten.

I moved up from Nora's Victorian chair. Lenny quickly caught my movement. She came toward me, and I almost knocked over Nora's easel. The easel shook and a tube of yellow paint fell to the floor. The tube got caught under my foot and yellow paint squirted out.

"It happens," Lenny said.

"What?" I asked, dumbly, thinking of the yellow paint.

"My period."

"Oh."

"I missed two days. I thought I heard bugles blowing in my head for two days. I started to write you. But then I didn't know what to write. I didn't want to write one of those silly I'm-pregnant-what-do-I-do-now letters. I wouldn't mind being pregnant. I would welcome it. If I had something to welcome it with."

Lenny kissed me, and she took my hand down to her pad, to let me feel the bulge in her, the codpiece women wear, that I had never felt before.

"It's called the curse," Lenny said, "but I don't know if it is. I never had explained to me what happens when a woman bleeds. Nobody understands it. But it's part of us, like our eyesight. It's the waiting for the first blood that sends a woman off into nerves. Maybe it's fear. It's one of those awful controlled balances in our body like our temperature. It's the controlled balances in our body that gave rise to all of our ethical behavior. It's crazy for me to talk on like this when you're on pass. I wanted to be with you on Nora's cot here. I can in three days. I can for the next twenty-eight days."

"Are you there?" we heard Nora call out. "I thought you would be!"

Nora called from the second landing. I went out to the top-floor landing and called down to Nora. She took her time climbing the stairs, pausing on the landings. "My God," she called up, "I can only walk up these stairs when I'm boozed. I must get a building with a lift. Well," Nora said to me, "well."

I poured a glass of Marsala for Nora. Lenny prepared

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a hero sandwich. Nora looked at Lenny and when she smiled, I knew she knew Lenny had her period. How she knew, I didn't know, unless Lenny had casually mentioned it to her over the weekend. Certainly Lenny and Nora met and spoke and I would have liked to listen with an omniscient ear when they met at the Dog and Duck, or when Lenny sat naked in the chair I sat on, and Nora looked at her with her eyes that had looked on naked models since 1915. What was there new to see in the naked body? Rembrandt seldom painted nudes. Rembrandt was like me, he was after the face, our faces that collect up the refuse, the refutation, the requiems in our bodies.

Lenny looked toward me as though we should flee Nora. Lenny felt herself interrupted, I could see it, and it showed in her hands that clumsily prepared a salami sandwich for Nora.

"I left Leming," Nora said, "he's an awful faggot. I can't stand him in the bright sunlight. He picked up a boy at the gallery. He does it so swiftly, with such certainty, like a toad, really, and the boy went so willingly but so docile, what kind of a lover can he be, Leming? And I knew you two would come here. This isn't a day for the Café Royal. This is a good lunch. Paul, they train you well in the American Army."

"Yes," Lenny said, "we're all trained well."

Nora almost spilled her wine. She quickly balanced the water glass. But her face saddened, at the unexpected from Lenny.

"I was trained," Nora said, "never to eat oysters at a public bar."

I poured more wine for Nora.

Nora's room was quiet, so quiet that we all began listening and hearing at the same time, and from outside the window came the buzzing, a buzzing that began to be silent, so silent that we held our breaths and looked toward the walls to see if they would crumble. We all sat perfectly still. It was perfectly possible for all of us to die within the next fifteen or twenty seconds. There was no place to hide. We sat facing one another. None of us looked afraid to die. The crash came with a great plod. The walls of Nora's room shook. The window glass blew out. The building seemed lifted out of the ground. But none of us died.

I rushed to the window, not knowing if the side of the house might collapse, the wall falling to Fitzroy Street. I saw a cloud of smoke rising a block away, and the smoke revealed a shattered building. Nora rushed to the window.

"The Germans! The Germans!" she cried. "They would think of something like this! I think it's the Dillon house. Or what was the Dillons'. They're all home. I walked them home from Windmill Street."

Lenny hurried to the window.

"It is the Dillon house," she said.

Nora turned away from the window. Away off toward Hyde Park were the barrage balloons that couldn't slice apart the buzz bombs. I watched a doodlebug lazily going through the cloudless blue sky. The doodlebug passed over the Dillon house, out of sight, fat as a bloody bedbug.

"I think it's time," Lenny said, "for me to get back to the firm."

"Stay," Nora said.

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"I've got to get back. They're giving me a week's leave soon. I'm doing what the firm calls cleaning up. This is a paper civilization, that's why everything is going up in smoke. We'll have no ruins, Nora, just records." And as a memorial to the Dillons, Lenny said, "We've built no monuments, just memorials. But then one civilization never knows what the next civilization will say about it. If I die, I'll tell God everything, like some civil servant, ready to betray all of the bureaucratic secrets."

Lenny picked up her purse and I moved away from the window to take Lenny back to her firm.

On Tottenham Court Road we rushed into the Golden Coach and ordered two double whiskies.

"Quickly," Lenny said, "I have to get back."

We walked from Tottenham Court Road to Lenny's firm. The streets off Tottenham Court Road had the emptiness of Regent Street. The buzz bombs were overhead. We walked fast to get to Holborn, not to get Lenny back on time, but because the empty streets insisted you rush.

But we stopped in Bedford Square. It suddenly looked beautiful. Great shafts of light broke through the sky. The cloudless blue was breaking up into streaks of a frightening green. Bedford Square stood alone under the sky, its trees and leaves catching the brilliant light.

"A thunderstorm," Lenny said. "This is a good Cornish sky."

"Can you go to Cornwall with me?" I asked Lenny.

"When?" Lenny asked. "I didn't know you were going."

"I have a leave coming up. It's for ten days."

"I get a week. When is your ten days?"

"In three weeks."

"I need a good excuse for Robert."

"You can't just go away for ten days?"

"I can go away forever but not for ten days."

"Oh."

"I can try to think of something. But ten days is such a long excuse."

"Family business in Helston?"

"He would want to go. Robert likes Cornwall. He'd live there permanently if he had a good reason for doing so."

"It is hard," I said, "to think of a reason."

"He wouldn't let me go, if I just asked him, the way I asked about the 100-mission party."

"What did he say about it?"

"He just tumbled me into bed the minute I got into the house. I guess he thought he could tell that way if I had been to bed with you."

"Did he say anything about the musette bag of stuff?"

"I just told him that it was a present that most of the guests got, like a grab bag at a children's party. He likes the Gem blades. Those he would like more of."

"Does he ask about me?"

"He's very curious about you. Nora told him that you're a famous writer. He wanted to know from me what you've written. I told him what I feel, that it's all there, in you, that Robert understands, and I think it almost makes it possible for him to let me see you. He wants you to come over to the house for a full evening. He's curious about Americans. I don't know about men who know their wives are sleeping or may be sleeping with other men. I don't know what they feel. I can't

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tell from Robert. We're all so expert at concealing ourselves. I don't like it. Look, I'll get away. That's a chance I'll have to take. But my God, don't tell any of this to Nora. She's told enough tales as it is. She got boozed up in the Dog and Duck the other night and decided on the spur of the moment to tell everyone that you were sending me to America to live in a villa in California."

"She's your friend, though," I said.

"It frightens me to think Nora's one of the few friends I have in London. But she's been dispensing gossip and rumors for twenty-five years. She can't stop now. And whatever she hears she translates into what she wants to say. I'm careful with Nora. But she's not with others."

We were past Red Lion Square, turning into Lenny's firm, people hurrying into the shelter of the massive stone work of the nineteenth century, trying to outlive the doodlebugs.

"Will I see you tonight?" I asked Lenny.

"I'm meeting Robert at the Dog and Duck. I'll have to work late to make up this time. I'll see you there."

I left Lenny and walked to Leicester Square. I picked up, like my friend Boswell, a small dark Lancaster girl who had a white-walled room on Dean Street and for two hours I lay in her dank bed, and then I went back to Charlotte Street to take Nora to dinner.

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Nora said, "Sit there by the window. The Germans won't be sending over any more doodlebugs until after supper. Now look at me. I'm not one of those people who draw character but I want it to at least look like you. It may be the only thing you bring home from this war. All I remember of the First World War is the Germans' having the bad sense to shell Paris. And my leaving Paris for London. That cold empty train to the Dover connection. The cold gray rolling water of the Channel that swamped our steamer, hurling us from one side of the deck to the other. I lost two of Modigliani's drawings. I could have had a Matisse for the price of that bottle of Marsala. I did have a Picasso but that went three years ago to a sharp-eyed American colonel. I think he enlisted in the Army to steal paintings. I see him now in London prowling among people, asking questions about Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Cézanne. Everybody knows him now. He's waiting for the invasion like a fat spider. He'll be trading cartons of Camel cigarettes for Cézannes. I was in Paris when a shell fell. The Parisians were shocked. A million of their men were dead in the nearby woods. But they were shocked that the Pantheon might be shelled. The cafés were buzzing. Even the prostitutes were angry at the Germans. *Le Boche!* I remember

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saying, being very young then, *Le Homo sapiens!* The French don't count in Paris the way the English do in London. London would be the Bank of England without the Londoners. I never had a Frenchman for a lover in Paris. Poles, Italians, Americans, South Americans, even a Swiss, a Russian. The American was a writer from Indiana. He was tall and thin, red-faced, and lived on checks, and his ambition was never to work. I liked meeting the American writers. I could never figure out why they traveled 5,000 miles to write. I crossed the Channel to paint. But I did most of my painting on Fitzroy Street. I lost hold of Paris after the First World War. It began to belong to new people, sick people, who came to feed on the past. They were too full of sorrow for themselves, and I never knew what bothered them, for they all looked handsome, particularly the men, and the girls were all beautiful, and they thought getting it was some kind of a dangerous adventure. I remember going to bed with one American. He was full of conversation about it instead of attending to the business at hand. I think he became famous. It's so easy today to become famous. We're afraid of real fame, so we elect those to fame who aren't famous, and that makes it easy for everyone. I never became famous. Maybe I will in time. If somebody on *Punch* decides to make me famous. I would like to die in London a famous old lady with a house in Chelsea and a beagle dog and take long morning walks along the Thames and sit in a sunny study during the long afternoons and talk to those world travelers who like to ring up famous people. You take this picture home with you, Paul, hang it up in your living room, let the sun shine on it, and remember me.

My God, what do we need memories for!"

Nora abruptly put down her red chalk pencil. I saw her hands trembling. She brought her hands together to stop the trembling.

"It's just time," she said, "time. Time I talked myself out, out of those days in Paris that seemed to give everybody pleasure but me. Why don't I clean up this room? Straighten the couch? Wash the windows? Put the papers in order? Take those letters out of the fireplace? Put my pictures on the walls? Get a gallery? Find a man satisfied to plod into me and then turn over and go to sleep and not be afraid to wake up next to me in the morning? That's the worst of all. Getting up to the empty bed with the smell of him whoever he was. And you, what are you to do!"

Nora brought her trembling hands down on the arms of her Victorian chair. She pushed her fingers into the arms of the chair, holding her hands stiff until the trembling stopped.

"Don't become like me, Paul, full of alarums and exits, like those characters in Shakespeare who vanish when they have nothing left to say. I don't want to vanish and so I go forth from this room each day like a Biblical spy to report only what's happening to me to myself. Who's left to listen? I know how easy it is to spend ten years of your life in a pub and have them seem like ten minutes, less, for the ten years are less than less, the ten years, my God, is it thirty-five hundred days! A shilling a day saved would be thirty-five hundred shillings! That's the world we're in, the shilling-a-day people!"

Nora steadied her hands, rubbing them now on the arms of the Victorian chair. She bent over to the iron-

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work table covered with letters, the envelope I saw from Paris dated 1924. She took up the glass of Marsala and drank from it as though it was water, and it occurred to me that I had never swallowed two gulps on a glass of wine.

"I'm not so old that I can't see the future. But I am so old that I can't see a beginning. And my paintings! Six of them hang in relatively famous galleries. Fifty oils are in London homes. In Paris I used to sell my drawings for ten and fifteen francs, a batch for fifty francs. A South American gave me seventy-five francs for an oil. He was a sheep farmer with an income of fifteen million dollars a year. He came to Paris once a year and hired fifteen whores and they entertained him around the clock, always on call in a great big house in St. Germain. He invited me to his house one day. The whores were stunning. Magnificent creatures, the kind of whores that you never see on the boulevards, only getting in and out of taxis. Two of the whores were the most accomplished Lesbians in Paris and when he said *perform*, they leapt at each other like tigers. We all had dinner at a huge table covered with bottles of champagne and roasts sent in from the restaurants and I watched it like a visitor from Illinois. I looked at my painting he bought. It was one of the best things I had done—the rich do have taste, don't think they don't. How do you like? he asked me, pointing to his fifteen whores. I said it would be wonderful if you had fifteen dicks. He almost died, with all of his fifteen millions, of a heart attack, laughing. He later died, of course. He fell from a horse in Argentina and died twenty minutes later, before even the calls could go out to the surgeons in America. He always

promised to leave me £10 a week income, which is an enormous sum if you don't have money. I do have an income, it's £2 a week, sent to me biweekly from my solicitor and he won't send me a penny more and it's mine for life, which is how I live if you've wondered. I was 22 when I knew the South American."

I didn't move from the pose I had taken by the window. Nora's eyes were on me. She spoke directly to me, in a voice I hadn't heard before, for she seldom spoke to be heard, only to be acknowledged.

"I'm 53 now, an absurd age for a woman, for most women begin to go into a psychepause at 50. They've earned their habits and I imagine only occasionally are they called upon to perform like a 19-year-old and most women are probably pretty successful at accommodating themselves to the well-rehearsed sexual lives of their husbands. They have only to lift their legs or open their mouths. I have a sea captain who comes in to see me twice a month. I've known him since 1919. You haven't met him yet. He does all kinds of dangerous things with small boats in the Channel. He comes straight from port into my bed and he heaves up and down on me until he turns over to sleep from exhaustion. When he awakes he stares down on my body as though I'm the carved figurehead of a whaling ship. He wears a huge beard. His legs and back are hairy. He's a Welshman. I can't understand half of the words he says but they're all full of Welsh sadness. He writes an occasional story for *Lilliput*. When he awakes he looks like a great bear. He stares down at my body, then he crawls over to me, raising himself on his forearms, and before he begins, he says to me, This don't change, it don't, it does not, and

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he comes into me like the sea going into a child's castle on the beach and I weep and weep because when he wanted me to marry him I said no and he took up and married a quirk who makes potholders all day long in Liverpool."

Nora put down her red crayon pencil to make an erasure, using a thick gum eraser.

"This will look like you, as you are now. Your eyes are the best part of you, they come together in focus, they see. I like your eyes. I saw your eyes first in the pub on Dean Street. You suddenly saw me! I was startled. That you saw me. And you don't fool me with your long silences. I know you're talking along with me, answering me on every turn, asking why I am telling you about a bearded sea captain who blows into my bed and then hauls off to sleep. The South American with fifteen whores. And what do you look like on this piece of Oxford Street drawing paper. We all came nearer to dying than living this afternoon and I saw that none of us were afraid to die when the bomb cut out and all afternoon I've been in my bed asking why we weren't afraid. It can't be that we're used to the bombs. We can't be used to death. I have no answer. But I did think of it. And thinking of the bomb and the three of us, I thought of myself. And I thought that suddenly in the entire world I had you and Lenny to worry about, and no one else. I think of you a lot. May and December. But that's too Oracle for me. And I hate the Freudian monsters. I remember when Freud came to Paris. Suddenly the century had names for all of the dirty little things people do. Freud gave all of the misfits a place to fit into. He won't last long. Another fifty years and he'll be more the sub-

ject of wonder than of practice. But Lenny—”

Nora saw me move sharply. I lost my pose, if it could be called a pose, sitting stock still, but Lenny's name caused me to look up at Nora.

Nora motioned me sharply back into the pose. “I'm drawing you,” Nora said.

We heard a rumbling.

“My God,” Nora said, “not again on this bloody street!”

We listened for the buzzing of the bomb. The rumbling grew louder. A rumbling burst of thunder broke and thundered in the sky. A flash of lightning tore through the sky into the room. Nora rushed over to the broken window. The sky was a lead gray. The roofs off Charlotte Street black against the gray sky. A single bolt of lightning struck the London sky, a magnificent bolt, vast enough to shatter the commandments and it lit the blacked out city.

“London,” Nora said, “my God, and now God wants to destroy it.” Nora pushed back the blanket that she used to black out her window. “The plague, the fire, the Germans, now God. I heard a drunken Yank say on Charing Cross Road that there was a bomb brighter than the sun that could kill fifty thousand people at a time. He said he read it in a science magazine in Pittsburgh. I'm sure that we're working on a bomb that will melt all Germany into a Cheshire cat. Don't the Germans know that the Americans have never lost a battle?”

Nora sat back deep on her studio bed. “I'll finish your drawing when my hands stop shaking.”

Nora rubbed her hands, lacing her fingers together. “My hands,” she said, “do we paint with our hands or

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head? I remember poor Pascin. He never seemed to lift a brush but all of those half-naked girls came from his brush, those wonderful girls, so full of flesh, so full of what I told him was our central nervous system. He hanged himself. He cut his throat. He died. It was a time for painting then. To get down form before it was completely lost to jazz. Painting flourishes when everything else is dead. I can see ten million painters painting if this war ever ends. And maybe five good paintings will come from the ten million. But at least the five will be there. Do you know what it means, Paul, to paint a picture that will last and last, that holds up under every kind of silliness that we can invent, that shines on a wall with more of forever in it than even the stars, for we know they crumble up and die, or are dead? During the blitz I walked through the burning streets of the East End and did what I could. And I wanted to see if the blitz meant that something different was happening to us, a portent, but no. I did pick up a baby charred like a baked potato. I saw a man with his head blown off. I saw a pile of bodies piled as Pepys must have seen them. I saw the fire over London. But now we've burnt Hamburg. I heard from an RAF man that the flames rushed down the streets like a tornado, vast sheets of fire, and maybe fifty thousand Germans were burned in their homes. If so, it's the least of their hells. The only paintings I've done since the war have been of Lenny. And do you know why?"

I shook my head, holding the pose, for I knew Nora was still looking at me and she would get back to her red crayon pencil. Her hands now were quiet. The trembling had stopped. Nora picked up her glass of Marsala.

She smelled the wine without drinking it. She broke off a piece of the bread, dunked the bread into the wine, then she drank the rest of the wine. Nora stood up by the only light in the room, the heavy iron lamp, the purple shade torn. Nora had started drawing me when it was twilight but now it was black and Nora saw that the lamp was casting the wrong shadows on my face. Nora took the shade off the lamp. The light sprang into the darkness of the room, the frames, the stretchers, the canvases, the rolled-up linen, the painting that Nora was holding for Peggy Horne who lived on Kings Road in Chelsea, a canvas 2 by 3 feet, of dirty browns, a thickly-laid paint that looked as though it might have just dropped into the world from a human body. Peggy Horne was a Lesbian and she only came into Charlotte Street when she wanted to get roaring drunk. I went home with her one night. She had a big house, with a big garden, great big rooms with 18-foot ceilings, a fire-place big enough to roast a cow. The rooms were empty except for six chairs, two beds. She was an American who *had been in Chelsea for fifteen years. Just as we left the Crown she picked up a Lesbian who got into the taxi with us. The Lesbian made tea for us while I scored Peggy, then Peggy said let me alone until morning and she called the Lesbian into bed and I heard wet sounds all through the night. In the morning Peggy Horne made the tea and talked as though we were in the breakfast room of the Savoy. I asked her who did the painting of the droppings. I think we all did, she said.*

Nora smiled at me. The first time she had smiled since she started the drawing. I liked Nora's smile. For I think she only smiled when something intuitive oc-

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curred to her, intuitive and sensible, and then her face had a persuasive glow that told you she was after all what she was.

"Let's finish you up. There now. It's just your mouth that I haven't got right. I don't know yet what it wants to do. But we'll find out. If we live long enough we all find out who we are."

I wanted to run my tongue over my mouth to see what Nora saw. But I didn't dare move. I waited. Nora looked at the drawing on the table. She picked up the pad of heavy white paper.

"If you ever get to Rome look at the mouths of the Roman ladies, I mean from twenty centuries ago. The statues are all mouths. The men knew what they were carving. The Greeks also looked to the mouth. Nobody else I know has bothered with a woman's mouth. A woman's mouth tells more than all of the words that come out of it. I often look at my mouth now against the mouths of the Roman ladies who lived twenty centuries ago. We bother more with the breasts and I have no breasts. I never did. They were always like undernourished pears. Only when they first popped out of me were they firm and nice and they had such a wonderful tingle. I can't remember a man who has paid any serious attention to my breasts. The sea captain completely ignores them. And now of course they've had it, their opportunity to be tugged on by a pair of toothless gums, to be relentlessly gnawed and loyed. I had one pregnancy and it turned out to be a mess. The man behaved as though I was going to give birth to a sea horse rather than his child. I found it insulting and I had an abortion performed by a Chinese doctor in Paris who had the

most gentle hands. I even managed to pay for the abortion out of my own money. And I told the young man the next time to put his diddle in an arse where it belonged. He told that story all over Paris and it made him more immediately famous than anything that has happened to him since. He's still living in London in a kind of eternal cloud of tobacco smoke and heavy turtle-neck sweaters that he wore as an undergraduate. He has five children and I think the children send him little pinches of arsenic in their annual Christmas bonbons. When we occasionally meet he behaves as though I'm going to haul him off to Bow Street. I think about him too much. Because he's the only man who ever made me pregnant. I've known, in London and Paris, women living somewhat like me who deliberately had babies that they raised, independent of marriage, so that they wouldn't be denied birth. And the children more or less grew up like other people. I remember when the time approached when I was beginning to be told by my Harley Street physician who doesn't charge me for his examinations that I was reaching that absolute point when I could no longer have a child. I couldn't have wanted a child then, but to be told that I couldn't have one, not now, or later, not again, that life again had sprung one of its neat traps, I went off into fury, out of his office, into the White Horse, where I literally ordered my sea captain to hop it home with me and into me. I felt like Cyrano fighting his duel with death. Cyrano was lucky and died. And my sea captain almost died on my disenfranchised body. I was 46 when my Harley Street physician invited me in for a cutting. Out it went of me, a kind of sodden mess, no good to me, used up in its time, dumped into a pail,

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burnt or buried, with no tooth fairy to come to me that night. There is a burden of being a woman, and I suspect a man, that is probably more than any of us can bear alone. It's the only way I can explain these senseless bombings over London, that stupid but vicious doodle-bug that fell on the Dillons, killing them all, three generations at a blow like the tailor, it's not that the Dillons die, but just that somebody dies, and those who live, well they live, like we do, the death of the Dillons hasn't changed us, or has it, we never know until we're lucky and life presents us with a kind of a glamorous test. When I was a girl in a boarding school in Devon there was a bright young Scottish girl who I swore had an affair with the headmistress. I know she did with half of the girls she could bully. But I remember her because one night when we were supposed to be asleep and when she was relaxing from one of her sorties, she asked us, If you had only one question to ask and you knew it would be answered, what would your question be? The strangest thing was that most of the girls refused to put up a question. One remarkable girl did say, I 'would like to know if there is a God. The bully didn't ask me the question face to face, and so I didn't have to think of what I would say. Now and some forty years later I don't know what I would ask. Forty years is such a short time when you're old enough to divide your life into chunks. And now it takes no Isaiah to see that I have no child. I have no organs for having a child. I have no husband. I have no income. I have no breasts. I don't even have the advantage of a decent toilet. I have no profession. I have a kind of nagging hold on things, like a baby holding on to its rattle. And it will soon be the middle half of the

twentieth century, at which time I will be past the age of sixty, and no longer even available to my sea captain, or he available to me. I can only think of one miracle, that there may actually be a God."

Nora presented me with my drawing. But first she sprayed it with a fixative and then she drew pencil marks to frame the drawing.

"What do you think?" Nora asked.

Nora and I hurried down Charlotte Street to the Dog and Duck, Nora wrapped in a thick wool scarf. I had my GI raincoat, the pockets stuffed with packs of Chesterfield cigarettes. The rumbling had broken into rain, a drizzly rain, the rain almost white against the blackout. My flashlight lit the curbs to avoid the puddles. Nora said she didn't want to eat in a restaurant. We passed the restaurants on Charlotte Street, the Italian, French, Russian, the barkers standing in the doorways, offering meals unobtainable in the rest of England. The pub dinner is still the best, Nora said, if you can recognize the difference between horsemeat and cows. Nora asked me to step into the Swiss delicatessen and get some Cheddar and dry crackers. That will keep me from being hungry, Nora said. "The thought of a restaurant makes me ill now, they're inhuman, restaurants, if you have to depend of them."

I splashed into a puddle. Nora caught hold of my arm.

"Thank God I rolled up those lovely nylons you brought me and put them into a drawer for the next London Painters' showing. The human family," Nora said, "I heard our German friends have left the human family. Did you see those stories coming through about their camps? The Germans have trained other Germans

to stick people into ovens and to burn them because it's easier to dispose of their pile of bodies that way. And they have to kill them first, to make it human, and they're supposed to be having trouble killing them fast enough, and they're using gas, pretending people are being led into showers and with all of their ingenuity they can't think of ways to kill the bodies off fast enough or to dispose of them fast enough. I suppose it's all true. But I don't think we'll ever believe it. I still don't believe the Dillons are dead. If I was dead now from this afternoon would I still be walking down to the Dog and Duck—does it all end, so abruptly, do you think so, just so quick, so final, that not even a second chance is offered, a chance to go at the world as though it's the most delicious mud puddle? I absolutely refuse to believe it. But it doesn't seem to make any difference whether I refuse to believe it or not. I wish it did! The drizzly rain, these fat drizzly rains," Nora said, "the rains always used to greet me in and out of Paris, and London was always in fog. The cliffs of Dover are extraordinary, so chalk white, I wish I could paint that sort of thing."

I had left my drawing in Nora's room, though I wanted to show it to Lenny at the Dog and Duck, but Nora said not to carry it through the rain. Nora asked me what did I think? What didn't I think! Not about the drawing. It was good. Nora couldn't make a bad drawing, not when she was caught up. But what she said about herself. I could have probably guessed it all but to hear it coming from her mouth (the extraordinary things she said about mouths!) was like being led on a tour of the Vatican by St. Paul. There was more in Nora. We never exhaust ourselves when we talk of ourselves. The in-

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timacies are like the intimacies in sex, they only lead farther and farther from intimacy. The fog came at us, thick, the rain giving way to the fog, a fog fatter than any I had yet seen, not white now, but a nasty yellow, rising thick, like a pot of bubbling green pea soup.

Murdi was drunk when we walked into the Dog and Duck. He looked like a sweating black horse with an iron bit flung into his mouth. His white duck pants were rumpled, his tightly buttoned three-quarter black coat narrowed into a ring around his neck.

"I need some truth, some truth," he was saying to a magnificent dudhead blonde I had never seen before. The blonde tugged on Murdi's coat to leave the Dog and Duck. "Here's the American!" he greeted me. "Where they manufacture truth. Pfc., I don't want America to pee on me!" Murdi laughed, pulling Nora and myself to the bar. "Whisky," he ordered. He took a pound note lying on the bar and shoved it forward for whisky. "Nora and her American. Nora says you're taking her to America in your duffel bag. Don't go, Nora, America is a cruel country."

Murdi presented the blonde. "You must know this wonderful creature, Pfc., she is a star at the Duchess and her boobies are the most magnificent teats in Britain." "Murdi," the blonde protested. "The truth," Murdi shouted, in his voice of truth, his extraordinary ringing voice that had the cry of a child in it, a child crying out that he had just seen a toad. "The truth," Murdi repeated, "I need some simple truth. You know what your American, Mr. Adams, said, Pfc., no poetry can bloom in the arid modern soil, and on those lines has been written 100 per cent of the modern poetry. It's fantastic! Those

fuckers the Germans are actually sacrificing themselves to give us a picture of the future, but they burnt their Homers first. It's fantastic! Miss Ellen here has the most magnificent boobies in Britain and if you're a colonel you can suck them for £10."

Murdi spilled the whisky, handing the glasses to us.

"C'mon, Pfc., join me in a pee."

Murdi took me by the arm, leading me through the dense drinkers of the Dog and Duck, the drinkers piled back to the blackout curtain, standing on the stairs leading to the ladies' john. Murdi splattered the wall of the urinal. I joined him. "I find pissing extraordinary," Murdi said. "You must get away from these bloody women one night and come up to my place. Or come up to my offices. Your friend Lenny likes you, I hear. She's as good as you can go. Nora. I love her. It would be wicked not to love Nora, don't you think?"

"I think so," I said.

"And you must get into her knickers, old man, if you haven't, with her on top."

I saw Robert standing at the bar, next to Nora. Lenny was standing next to the blonde, who looked ready to run. Nora looked from me to Lenny to Robert and I reached into my pocket for a pack of Chesterfields.

I put a pound note on the bar and ordered six whiskies. Robert unwound his thick green woolen scarf that looked hand knitted. I wondered if Lenny had knitted it for him. Robert didn't take particular notice of me, except that he fixed me in his gaze like a man taking aim for the dart board.

"Cheers," Nora said, taking her glass of whisky, "cheers."

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"Yes, Nora, cheers," Murdi said. "Do you know in America the wonderful Americans say 'To your health'? I always believe, Nora, in looking for the commonsense sayings to know what people are really talking about. The American soldiers have a bloody good saying, do you know what it is? Listen: 'You never had it so good!' And the completely fantastic thing is that most of the American soldiers never had it so good as they now have it in the American Army. And your American here will tell you it's true. Can you imagine never living so good as you live as a soldier in a war in which at least fifty to seventy million people will be eventually killed? It's too fantastic. Do they say that too in the British Army, Robert?" Murdi asked. "You were one."

"You know, the British Army has been notorious for making its soldiers feel like rats caught in a trap, and in the same breath leading them to some kind of a greater glory. I don't know which is worse or better or whether it makes any real difference. The soldier now is a prisoner of the state. And I don't think the American Army is much different in that respect. What does the American soldier say?" Robert spoke in a pub voice, knowing Murdi was drunk, and he looked straight at me to hear me speak.

"I think," I said, "the civilian soldier was born in the American Revolution. I don't think America is over that revolution yet. There were riots in New York City when it was suggested that men be drafted for the Union Army. Yet the Civil War was a bloody war. In this war ten million Americans have already left to be soldiers without a single riot. I don't know what I'm saying, except that war today isn't war, it's a social activity in which

millions and billions of people seem to be willing to put their most incredible energy to work. And I wouldn't underestimate the amount of energy it requires to lift a glass of whisky in a pub below a sky in which a buzz bomb may suddenly drop like a pigeon's turd."

Murdi roared, "Cheers!" and choked on his drink, doubling up, sputtering.

Lenny slapped Murdi on his back and he sat coughing on his stool.

"My God," Murdi said, "they say there are two times in a man's life when he's dead, when he coughs and when he doesn't have an orgasm." He got up from the stool, taking hold of Miss Ellen. "Let's go and get you out of your knickers."

"You won't be able to see in the fog, Murdi," Nora said.

"Nora, don't be so practical. The fog is my baby. I invented the fog when I was a child. When I step into a fog I am like those Himalayan natives who can walk up the sides of Big Ben barefooted." "We should wait if it's nasty," Miss Ellen said. "Lenny," Murdi said, "you just came through the fog. Do you think I and Miss Ellen can maneuver it to Shepherd's Market? Or should I wait here with my Pfc. for the dawn's early light? You must come with us now to Shepherd's Market," Murdi said to me. "Let's all go!" "No, Murdi," Miss Ellen said, firmly, to stop a party before it began. "Then you take your high-priced ass to Shepherd's Market and wait for me and don't let any American colonels in bugging." "I will go!" "Go!" Murdi said. "I don't want to bugger." Murdi took a pound note out of his white duck pants and put it on the bar. He turned his back on Miss Ellen.

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She left the bar to empty herself in the ladies' room.

"It's extraordinary," Murdi said, "how I came to meet her. She was brought to my flat by a Dutchman. He learned how to beat on bongo drums in California when he studied flying in America. He had two little drums that he beat on with his hands and she got up and began to take off her clothes and there were her extraordinary breasts, almost awesome, and she made you feel you were bugging a Henry Moore." Murdi brought his whisky up to his mouth, then put it down. "No more, for I hate the vomiting that comes with it." He walked away from the bar to sit at a chair made vacant, trying not to stagger and to keep himself from coughing.

"Murdi never let me start my sentence," Lenny said. "I would have told him not to go out in the fog, at least not to walk to Shepherd's Market, and there aren't any cabs out. We just made it in. Are there fogs like this in Chicago?" Lenny asked me.

"I only spent five hours in Chicago on a troop train. Chicago just looked dirty to me. A sort of useless city."

"Is it true," Robert asked me, "that there is only one city in America—New York? And the rest take their cue from New York?"

"It's true if you mean a city city. But the rest get by somehow. New York comes to them and they come to New York. A hundred and fifty thousand travelers enter New York each day and they carry away some of New York. Though they fight the city. They like to pretend that no people live in New York."

"Why?" Lenny asked.

"Why?" I repeated. "I don't know why. I think we all like to believe that none of us exist."

"For what reason?" Robert asked me, almost too sharply.

"Because we're afraid to love."

"Love," Nora said, flatly, "how could we all love?"

"How can we all hate so easily?" Lenny asked.

"My God!" Nora said. "This is too suddenly sober for me."

"I don't like," Robert said loudly, "talk about love and hate without power behind it. It should only be when you're ready to love. Then you know what you stand to win or lose, that's the fascination. We're afraid of love because we're afraid of gambling on it. What if we win love? What then? What if love makes us hate more? What if love isn't what we Christians say? I like Hebrew philosophy. And I rate all English thinkers by their knowledge of Hebrew philosophy. And by their knowledge I just mean if they categorically hate the Hebrews or if they dare to understand what the Hebrews were talking about. Let me tell you a story. I was in Jerusalem before going to North Africa. I walked around Jerusalem looking at all the usual sights. I saw the blood of Jesus, the tomb of David, the holy sights, and I stopped for a long time at the Wailing Wall. I talked to a Jew at the Wailing Wall. He was a big man, with powerful shoulders, a butcher in the Mea Shearim quarter of Jerusalem. Why do you wail? I asked him. I am not wailing, he told me. What are you doing then? I asked him. He said, I am holding up the wall. The wall? I asked him. Yes, he said, the wall. Can you explain to me what you mean? I asked him. Can you tell me why you want to know? he asked me. He gathered together his kaftan and left me at the Wailing Wall."

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Nora looked at Robert as though he had been talking insane nonsense. Lenny only half listened. I listened because I was waiting for the instant when he would acknowledge that I had been to bed with Lenny. I thought he was beginning when he started out by saying "I don't like." I had never before spoken to the husband of a woman I had taken to bed. I know that most of us have the extraordinary ability to hide what we do in bed. You seldom see a man and woman in public who make you feel that they're going to bed or they've just been or have been. I was standing almost crushed into Robert. And Lenny was pushed up against both of us. The pub was packed as the English pubs can be packed, like churches at Easter. This was the only public English intimacy permitted. I felt Lenny's breast against my arm. Her thigh was against my thigh. Lenny was pushed up against me by the blonde, who returned to say that she was leaving. Lenny's breast pressed into my arm, my mouth pushed against her ear.

"Sorry," the blonde said, "tell Murdi that I left."

"He's there," Nora pointed.

"I'll tell him then." Murdi had the gift of a penitent. I think women gave him their bodies so they could be cleansed of the other men they slept with.

"Would she be considered beautiful in New York?" Robert asked me. He had seen my mouth pushed against Lenny's ear. He knew Lenny's thigh was shoved into my thigh. But he didn't move to edge me. And it occurred to me that Robert knew she had her period and that probably gave him a confidence I hadn't expected.

"She's a little stiff for New York. New York lives on

anonymity. Once you know that you know, everything about New York."

"How do you mean? I never heard it said that way before." I think Robert was beginning to believe that I was a famous writer. I was saying what Buber had written me in a letter. Buber wrote: "After the Army I've got to get used to New York again, to realize that I don't count for shit. It's hard to do and giving me real trouble, which is probably why I've taken a forlorn hotel room, but I'll get over it since New York makes it a rule of the game that you put on the cloaca of anonymity. Excuse the bad pun. But I'm waiting now for a Bennington girl who knows just what she has to do to get her A."

"He means what most of us refused to believe in Paris," Nora said.

Robert took out a pound note. "Whisky all right for everyone?" he asked. "I'd like to hear your explanation," Robert said to me. "Would Lenny and myself be odd ducks in New York?"

"Are you thinking of going to New York?"

"It's a possibility."

"For any reason?" I asked.

"It will be the only undamaged city in the Western European world. It would be interesting to me to live in a city where bombs haven't fallen yet. I don't like London. It's not a city, really, I think historians two hundred years from now will refer to it as it is now, a vast regimented economic center where hundreds of thousands of people never have the faintest idea of what they were actually doing. But to be conscious of anonymity. For a city to be built on it. There you have me interested."

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"I can't guarantee it," I said to Robert.

"And you, Lenny?" Nora asked. "Would you go to New York?"

"I'm going to the john," Robert announced, loudly, as though it was important that we all know exactly where he was going. If he sits down, I said to myself, I have five minutes; if he stands, two minutes.

Lenny immediately relaxed her body against me. I felt all of the guarded stiffness go out of her body. She leaned fully against me. "That's good," she said, "so good."

"Let's go out into the blackout for a minute."

"No, I don't want to have a thing with him tonight. He's worse than a woman when I have my period. He gets suddenly desperate. It's silly."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say to him."

"The soldiers started it."

"The soldiers?"

"Just started it. He'll be back now."

"It takes him about five minutes there and back."

"He knows just how long it should take him."

Murdi came toward us, a drink in his hand. "I have decided to revive the idea of a party but not Shepherd's Market but in my flat, which is much more fashionable and less of a hole. And I have told Miss Big Teats to go join that line of girls that honor Shaftesbury Avenue. I want you to meet Kate. She is the most dazzling beauty in England at the moment, really." Murdi brought her forward.

Kate was no beauty. She looked as drunk as Murdi. She hung on to Murdi's arm as though she had won him throwing darts at Blackpool.

"And don't worry about the fog," Murdi said. "I do! can get you through the fog."

"It's a Wednesday night, Murdi," Lenny said.

"What Wednesday night?" Murdi said. His voice had the beginning of a quarrel. "There hasn't been a Wednesday night since the war started. I left incense burning in my flat. That's the trick when there's a fog. You follow the scent of the incense. The fog carries it in a straight line like the rest of physics. And our American, the Pfc., hasn't seen my flat yet and he must see it, otherwise he will never know London. London is a whore, old boy, she's been ready to sell herself for anything and everything for the past three hundred years. Lombard Street and Shaftesbury Avenue. Kate is a whore but a good whore. She can tell us the secrets of her profession. Pfc., while I was drinking a whisky Kate here calmly told me that she has buggered at least a thousand men. My God, we must get her to my flat and make her talk."

Robert came toward us from the john.

"There's to be a party," Murdi told him, "but your charming wife says it's Wednesday."

"It is Wednesday," Robert said.

"I have to work, Murdi, that's all Wednesday means," Lenny said.

"Kate here is willing to give up £10!"

"Murdi!"

"Yes."

Murdi turned to Lenny as she cried out his name, holding him, as though he was falling over the edge into honesty.

Lenny smiled at Murdi. But she also let him know that he had to stop. "It's just that time of the month,

Murdi, I'm sorry."

Robert looked relieved. He pulled his scarf up and around his neck.

"No, you're right," Murdi said to Lenny, "Wednesday is no night for a party. I had forgotten. I know what London can look like on Thursdays. The London mornings. Whelks spilled on the sidewalk, half-eaten by cats and those thundering bodies coming across Westminster Bridge. I wonder how much difference my birth has made." Murdi walked away with Kate, who followed after him, less £10.

"Do you think we ought to go?" Robert asked Lenny.

"Yes," she said, as though she preferred the fog outside.

"Good night, good to see you again," Robert said to me, hurriedly.

I shook hands good night with Lenny as best as I could.

Nora seemed to have vanished into the Dog and Duck away from the bar.

I walked out of the Dog and Duck and stepped into the fog and the Dog and Duck vanished before I had taken ten steps. When I turned, I didn't know where I had started from, and I turned again, deciding to follow a light that looked like the long block to Oxford Street.

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I heard fire engines. I heard muffled roars. I heard the ringing cry of alert sirens, though there was no alert for the doodlebugs. I didn't see smoke. I didn't get to the light on Oxford Street. It was no light. Just more fog. I had no landmark around me. No one to ask for directions. The Dog and Duck had vanished. And off the Dog and Duck and the cluster of pubs I knew, the squares turned abruptly into the vast frightening blocks, more massive than the New York blocks, pitch black in the blackout and now pitched out of existence by the fog.

No taxis were moving. I didn't pass a person or a whore on the sidewalk. I walked slowly, trying to feel my way into a known shop window, a pub, my flashlight trying to cut through the fog. But the light of the flashlight ended in more fog. I thought I was walking in the middle of the sidewalk but I came to no curbs. I realized I was in the street and I moved quickly to find the sidewalk. For no moving car could see me. I tried walking in a right angle to find the sidewalk. But there are no right angles in a fog. I reached out, groping, and banged into a window. I stood still, looking into the fog, to see if my eyes could see through the yellow swirling mist, pick out the form of London, perhaps the Dog and Duck. The alert sirens kept ringing, echoing the rockets. I

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smelled fried fish and chips. I smelled human tobacco.

"Hello!" I cried out. "Can you tell me where I am!"

But only the fog answered me. The fried fish and tobacco were part of the wash of the fog. No London voice cried out Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Street, Piccadilly!

A thick sweet smell of incense came on the fog. But it was incredible. Murdi didn't burn incense to find his way home through a fog. I invented the fog when I was a child. Perhaps Murdi did. It must be awesome to believe that you invented the fog. But there was no incense in the fog. It was smoke. I could be entering the labyrinthine blocks. I turned in a complete circle like a child playing "Pin the Tail on the Donkey." I heard an automobile horn. And suddenly, with a great yearning, I wanted to walk down the Strand in the fog, that great London street, and to get to it by crossing the bursting West End, to walk across all of the thundering blocks now swallowing up rockets, in and out of the tens of thousands of Yanks waiting for the early-morning hours of the invasion. This was the market place of the war. I had been told, before going on pass, that I could be called out with my well-oiled unused carbine to become part of the invasion, the completely fantastic army readying for Germany. Didn't the Germans know that ten million men were preparing to come to kill them? But the flights of the thousand bombers seemed to have no impact on the Germans except to kill them. What would have an impact on the Germans? It was frightening, no one idea seemed possible of reception, the war had no human solution, it was now in the movement of physics; a moving body continues to move until it hits an obstacle.

What law governed me? Now as I moved in the fog. The law of anatomy, the gift of the monkeys, I moved upright. The law of the river of time. The words coming to me were lifted out of the river of time, stopped suddenly like the birth of a child. The sea silence is wonderful, the sea silence that carries us from year to year like corked bottles. The law of love. We believe most of us finally in love. Yet no one knows what love is. And love had brought on the war. Love is recognition. The law of recognition is that we will do whatever we feel is necessary to cry out that we're human too. I didn't want to feel human. It was enough that I was.

I saw no lift in the fog. I heard no voices. I saw no moving cars. Even the rockets were silent. The rumbling and the booming had stopped. London was still, so still that it began to frighten me. In a fog, as in sleep, perhaps in death, all that is familiar is gone. I hurried, hoping to get past the fog. What if the bombs the Germans were hurling put all London asleep or dead? What if all England died, every person in every hamlet, in every village, in the towns that still kept registers from Richard II, the smoking cities of sooted raincoats, every professor at Oxford, Cambridge, all of the hereditary dukes, earls, the King, his Queen, the court, the poets, what if they all vanished into death, who would care and how long would it matter?

I smelled the incense again. Not chimney smoke but incense.

"Murdi!" I cried out into the fog, crying only to rid myself of the intrusion of death, that persistent stranger to us all, for I didn't expect Murdi to answer.

"Hello, you bloody fool!"

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"Where in the hell are you?"

"Up here!"

"Where? here!"

"Look up!"

"I can't see up!"

"I can't put a light on. I'll get a bloody fine. Just wait. I'll come down and fetch you."

I heard the window close. I waited in the fog, not knowing if Murdi would appear or if the fog had echoed me, the conversation, the conversation of sleep.

"Shine your flashlight this way," I heard. "This way. Hold it. What are you doing out in this silly fog? Here, follow me."

I could just make out Murdi. He looked very tall in the fog, his thinness part of the fog. His voice I knew. Going off to see whelks half-eaten by cats.

Murdi opened a door and my flashlight lit a narrow flight of stairs.

"It's just one flight. The bloody bulb went."

The flashlight lit the stairs, narrow, winding, turning into Murdi's flat, the incense thick, heavy.

"This is cuckoo! How did you find my place?"

"I smelled the incense."

"Not all the way from the Dog and Duck. That's too cuckoo."

"No, I got lost. I stepped out of the Dog and Duck after Lenny and Robert left and there I was, no place. I just started walking. Then I started talking to myself in the fog. Then I began to wonder where I was really at. Then I smelled incense. And I called out your name."

"It's cuckoo and very strange. Here, take off that wet coat. I've got whisky but would you like tea too?"

"I would."

"Good, it will only take a minute. That's an American saying, isn't it, that everything will take just a minute?"

"Just a minute."

"You're so worried about time, you Americans."

"Time is money," I said.

"My God, I forgot. I'm keeping a list of all the things I hear American. It's a crazy habit like going to the movies. But I think we ought to know a lot more about you Americans. You people seem to know so little about yourselves. Your literature is real trash, you know."

"There's some good stuff like Thoreau."

"My God, Thoreau was just repeating what he had learned from European literature, even if he didn't read European literature."

"Then Melville."

"I haven't read Melville. You can tell me about him. Get close to that fire. You have to keep sticking shillings into the bloody thing to keep warm."

Murdi had bookshelves from the floor to the ceiling, books piled on all three walls, the books piled on books. The incense burned on the mantel, three sticks, now down to the ash. The mantel was big, made of white marble, heavily carved. The chairs were for sitting. A bed alongside the windowed wall was covered with an Indian scarf. A magnificent tapestry of white running antelopes hung above the fireplace. The table in front of the fireplace held two bottles of whisky, *The Manchester Guardian*.

"Let's have the whisky first. The pot can always boil."

Murdi poured two stiff drinks of whisky.

"Because of the fog," he said.

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"Where's Kate?" I asked.

"My God, she left me as soon as we got out of the Dog and Duck. She asked me if I would be willing to bugger for only £5. I told her I only buggered according to the rates established by the Bank of England, 2/6, and she left, with that wonderful saying whores have, business is business dearie. How do you feel about paying to bugger?"

"It's sometimes convenient."

"I suppose you have to bugger in the Army like taking aspirin. I heard from some seamen on Commercial Road that the Germans have set up brothels that are rotten even for the Germans. They're using the girls in the camps and killing them off as soon as they don't please any more or when fresh ones come in on the transports. Can you imagine buggering a girl under those conditions? It's necrophilism. I suppose the Germans are the closest things to necrophiles the Western world has produced. Well, cheers."

Murdi drank about half his water glass of whisky. "I get these bottles from a diplomat who has been to France three times in the past eight months. You know of course that there's a whole underground world beneath the world we walk around in, of men dropping by parachute into France, by boat, making contact with resistance fighters, the fighters coming here to London, then returning. I had one here in my flat, a Scot, and he brought over two pieces that I'm going to use. These men know exactly what the Germans are doing and they fight them because they can't understand the logic of the Germans and they're frightened of non-logic, they'll all give their lives for logic. This is the first big fight

against non-reason, you know. My God, none ~~if~~ it makes sense, does it, it's all cuckoo. How did you really get here?"

"By what you say, cuckoo."

"You've never been to my place before?"

"No."

"Nora never told you where it is?"

"No."

"You just walked in the fog and here you are?"

"That's right."

"You called out 'Murdi!' That I heard very distinctly. My God, I thought, it can't be the American with the duffel bag. It's too wild. But I called back down. And here you are. Do you remember why you called out my name?"

"I just smelled incense."

"I mean before you smelled the incense. Was there any kind of triggering, you know, the way we pick up a telephone to call a person who already has put through the call on the other end? What Shakespeare called more things in heaven and earth?"

"I was walking in the fog. I didn't know where I was at. I had a sudden urge to go down to the Strand. Then I said to myself what do I want to be on the Strand for? Then London became still, very still, so still that I got frightened. I began to feel that the fog was a gas the Germans had sent over in the doodlebugs, a gas that had quietly killed everyone in England, and I remember asking myself, who would care and how long would it matter if all of England vanished? Then I smelled your incense and I called out 'Murdi.' "

"That's too much!" Murdi finished his glass of whisky

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and quickly filled his glass and mine. "My diplomat friend drinks two bottles a day. On his last trip to Paris he went over in a fishing boat. He told me that he sat at the Dome, surrounded by German officers. He got involved in a conversation with the German officers. They were from Munich, the only city in Germany where the Germans ever made a pretense of civilization. Why did Hitler select Munich as his city, he asked the Germans. The mountains, one officer said. The museum, a second officer said. Hitler is a painter, you know, a third German said. A fine artist, the fourth German said. The fifth German officer was drunk and he said, Munich selected Hitler. Have you been to any of the camps? my diplomat friend asked them. Dachau, one German said. Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, they all repeated. What do you think of them? asked my diplomat friend. Think, said the German who was drunk, think, yes, let us think. My diplomat friend said he quietly slipped away from the Dome to let the German officers think while he kept a rendezvous with some men from the underground."

The kettle hissed. Murdi hurried toward the alcove and came out with it steaming. He dropped a handful of tea leaves into a gray earthen pot and poured the boiling water over the tea leaves.

"I think I have some biscuits. Here." Murdi brought a tin of square-shaped biscuits from the alcove.

"Where are you going to sleep tonight?" Murdi asked me.

"If the fog lifts, I'll go back to Nora's."

"You pay her a pound a week, don't you?"

"That's right."

"She calls you 'her American.' Did you know that?"

"Does she talk much about me?" I asked Murdi.

"I know what you mean," Murdi said, "when you say talk. She does. She's created you, you know. She makes you part of her talk, so that you begin to become somebody that has existence. Nora can do that better than anyone alive. It's a pity in a way that people only half listen to what she says. We only listen to people who we think are like ourselves. The rest just amuse us or irritate us and we have ways of getting rid of them quick enough by a great silence. I know that great silence. I feel it, you know, it's cuckoo, but what can you do?"

"Break into the silence," I said.

"No," Murdi said, "that's too American. It's a pity you can't escape being born an American, almost nobody has."

"Would you want Englishmen to escape being born Englishmen?"

"The English don't care about things the way you Americans do. It's the way you Americans care that's so bloody wrong."

"How?" I asked Murdi.

"My God!" he said. "Read your American writers. Not one of them lived in America. The bloody country frightened all of them. I wish Hitler had been afraid of Americans as Henry James was. We wouldn't have this bloody war now. I thought you knew all this; otherwise, why care? This war doesn't frighten me. What frightens me is that after the war America will be the most powerful country in the world. Half of the people with a brain still left in their head in Europe and England are thinking about just that. I hope it frightens some Americans too. This war is reasonably over. Except nobody wants it

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to end just now. Do you?"

Murdi didn't wait for an answer. He poured the brewed tea into two large blue cups and poured a stiff drink of whisky into the tea.

"I asked my resistance friend the same question, the Scot who brought over two pieces. Do you know what he said? If I could go on doing what I'm doing now. He admitted that he loved every minute of the war. The café meetings, the hidden rooms, the rendezvous with British agents, the boats slipping away from the coast, the jackets padded with guns, the parachute drops, the killing of Germans in sad little streets, trips to London, the mighty way he felt about himself as a man, is the way he put it. This war, he said, has made me a warrior. He buggers a friend of mine, a miner from South Wales, and my friend says he unbuckles his armor like Hercules. Before the war he used to sit at a café in Montparnesse and read English detective novels. I published one or two of his stories and that was enough to make him a name and to keep him occupied until the war began. And in the war he developed into this amazing animal, a kind of leopard moving through the cobbled streets of Paris, striking down Germans and organizing resistance groups. How did it happen is the question I ask. For if poetry is to bloom we must know what kind of a soil we're planting it in. I'm writing a piece about my friend, otherwise I wouldn't be talking about him so much. You don't say much but you listen well."

"What do you say about your friend?" I asked Murdi. I was listening to Murdi. I couldn't tell whether he was still drunk from the Dog and Duck. He had drunk a water glass of whisky since I entered his room. But he

didn't look drunk. Not as he looked in the Dog and Duck. But maybe he was just bored in the pub. The blonde with the most magnificent teats in England didn't belong to him. Certainly the £10 whore, Kate, didn't belong. He seemed to have no real friends in the pub. He liked Lenny. Murdi sensed I was thinking about him. He smiled. A fine smile like you get from a child when you least expect it.

"When I say I'm writing it means I haven't written it yet. I don't know what to say about him. He's probably just part of the war. He'll cease to exist when the war ends. I think most of us will."

"Why?" I asked Murdi.

"Because there'll be a new generation breathing down our necks who won't believe a word we tell them. They'll adopt one or two heroes, enough to give themselves continuity. The rest of us, we'll be dead, because we'll want it that way. Only the threat of a new war will give us any real conversation. We'll be wondering what happened to all of the excitement. Even you admit the war is exciting. I heard it in your voice. The London fog, the bombs falling, the dull thuds, the sirens, the stillness, the great island gone. Don't you see! Don't give up on Lenny!" Murdi cried suddenly, his voice full of a booming power like a kettledrum booming up. "And bugger her! Take her to Cornwall! When you get that close to a woman take her on! Stick your head in her! Crawl down into her! Tell her! That's the *id* of it! That's what we hear! That's what we run from! We don't know what a woman is or can be!"

Murdi finished the rest of his tea soaked with whisky. He poured more tea into his cup and poured in more

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whisky, stirring the still-hot tea. He looked at me over his tea, blowing on his whiskied tea. "You must buy the real tea leaves," Murdi said. "Do you know the Isle of Wight?" Murdi asked me. I said I had heard of it. "I went there in 1919 on a holiday," Murdi said. "I traveled with a girl. Her name was Edith Sommers. She died after we were on the island for three days. The first two days were fantastic. I had never been with a girl like that before, I mean just free. She was pregnant. In her fifth month. I had already made up my mind to marry her. She was trying to be unconcerned but I knew she wanted me to marry her. I've never properly understood marriage. In my own family it was all done by contract. The English marriages are fantastic. Everybody marries who they should marry, almost never out of their class, yet they all start out by believing the incredible myth of love, which is only reserved for a few exceptional nuts. I don't know if I was in love with Edith. I suppose by Hammersmith standards I was. The trip to the Isle of Wight was decided on in the Dog and Duck. The first two days I tried to figure out how I would tell her that I had decided to marry. Because it seemed too fantastic to me that I should be married. I told her on the second night. On the third morning she died. She stumbled crossing a road and a truck didn't stop in time. The truck fractured her head and broke her back. The baby she carried also died. I screamed all that day like the native women in my village. I told the doctor I would kill him if he tried to give me a sedative. The next morning I took Edith back to London and her parents had her buried in York. You have to attend a funeral to realize how civilized they are. The English ministers know just

what to say. They have a marvelous way of making death seem proper and dignified and necessary and beyond question. And they also manage in a marvelous way to make everybody anxious to be home, away from the body, and to forget what they had witnessed. I went back to London. I got rid of everything in my flat that had belonged to Edith. I was still young enough then to think I could forget such a thing as the death of a woman of 26 who I was going to marry, who was carrying my baby that had managed to go into its fifth month of existence. Of course I didn't. I went out of my bloody head for a year. Which is one of the reasons why I didn't get called up in the war. The second year I went back to her grave. I paid for a stone. I stood on the ground above her body. The sky got dark. Those dark clouds that you get in Yorkshire came over me. One cloud came as close to me as the burning bush. I saw that the cloud looked like the face of a great wise man. I cried out to the cloud, why did she die! The cloud answered with a rumble. The sky darkened more with more dark clouds. The face of the great wise man in the cloud broke up into the head of a bull. I cried out again, why did she die! I saw lightning. The cloud with the great head of a bull shot away, blown by a northern wind. There were no more clouds in the sky. Just a dark gray cloudless sky with lightning breaking. A sexton came out of the church. A thin man carrying an enormous black umbrella. He came over to me with the umbrella. Why did she die? I asked him. Just her or all of us? he asked me. Just her, then, I said. I'm afraid I don't know, he said, and he walked away, the black umbrella over his head. Just then the minister came out and he carried a black umbrella. He came over

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to me with his umbrella. Why did she die? I asked him. He smiled that broad healthy smile of Yorkshire ministers and said, Do you think I know? He asked if he could give me a lift into town. I walked with him and he insisted on holding the black umbrella over my head, for the rain had started. He started to tell me how he became a minister. I didn't listen to him. I was more interested in the sky. I looked for the great head of a bull cloud but it of course was gone. The rain suddenly ended, which is possible in Yorkshire. The minister folded up his black umbrella. The sky brightened into a fantastic blue, a dazzling blue, covering the entire expanse of the sky. Below me I saw the town where she had been born. Those smoking chimneys and rooftops. I saw children coming up the road to play in the yard where she was buried. The bell of the church began to ring. I expected a hosanna to ring out of the dazzling blue. It seemed to me extraordinary that I was alive. As extraordinary as the fact that Edith was dead. There are less of the living than of the dead, I remember saying to myself. The earth seemed warmly hospitable. As though the dead had no objection about who walked over their bodies. I didn't know what to make of the whole thing. The minister had gone on ahead of me. Suddenly a little boy came up to me. He couldn't have been ten. Are you the one whose girl died? he asked me. Yes, I said. Edith was her name, he said. Yes, I said. She used to read to me, you know. What did she read? I asked. Would you like to hear? he said. Yes, I said. And in a voice strangely like Edith's, so much like hers that I began to tremble, he sang, Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man, do you know the muffin man that lives on Drury Lane?

He ran off, waving to me. My God, I remember saying, it's so simple to believe in God if one only had the slightest reason for doing so."

Murdi stopped and with no further reference to the long story he had just told me, he said, "That fog won't lift tonight. Why don't you curl up in that chair and get some sleep? Here, put your feet on the two of them."

He pulled his chair up to mine and I stretched out my feet, loosening my GI shoes. Murdi went over to his bed alongside a rack of books and he lay down with his clothes on, quickly asleep; but before he went off to sleep he said, "My God, how I would like to hear her sing Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, do you know the muffin man that lives in Drury Lane."

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Lenny wrote: Robert was furious about that night at the Dog and Duck. He didn't want to go in the first place and he yelled that I had led him into it. He violently dislikes Murdi but he was afraid to say so to Murdi. Murdi can be that way. Very sweet and then a positive bastard. Nora told me that she couldn't hold so many unspoken words between you and me and Robert and Murdi and herself in her head at one time and so went off in a corner to talk to Mrs. Stuart. Robert says he can't yell at Murdi because Murdi wouldn't understand why he was yelling, and it would become all twisted up. I like Murdi because he still has a violent innocence. It's not very practical in England where there's been no innocence for at least five centuries. I think he'll leave England one day. Robert was very interested in what you had to say about New York. He still wants you to come to the house. But I think that would be too fantastic now and I'm not up to it. I haven't mentioned the furlough to him yet. I'm tempted just to go. The Thursday morning was awful at work and maybe we should have all gone to Murdi's. He gives wonderful parties. I still have a special memory of the first party of Murdi's that I went to. It was so un-English. Nobody dared to be English, as a matter of fact. I'm over my period. Robert

asked me at breakfast on Tuesday morning if I wanted a baby as though he were asking me if I wanted another piece of toast. I was very flippant and said, How shall we make it? He got very angry. We fight too frequently now. I don't like it. But I feel his dependence on me now and I think that's the reason for all of the silly fights. He thinks you ought to be a major and can't understand why you're only a pfc. It's interesting to me the way he makes all kinds of objective observations about you but nothing personal, never a personal word. I think he knows I've been to bed with you. Maybe it's the way I am now in bed. It's all very frightening to me now. Almost as bad as when I was coming out of my teens. Nora invited me up for lunch. She looked awful. And it wasn't a pleasant lunch. Just some oily fish out of a tin. I think she meant it to be nicer. She talked on. But she didn't say a word about you. I think she's sorry she introduced us but she has her sea captain. I'm typing this at the office. I wish we could meet this afternoon for lunch on Montague Street. It's very lovely today in London. But the rockets have been dropping with more frequency. One landed near our flat. You almost don't see anyone on the street now. Everyone says this is much worse than the blitz. The new ones don't make a buzzing sound. They just plop out of the sky. And they seem to be bigger. Which is very frightening. It's as though we're all condemned, which is not the best way to run a civilization. I've got a map of Cornwall in front of me. Nora is right. St. Ives is a little showy. But there are other places in Cornwall. Magnificent places. It doesn't seem there's a Cornwall with London here as it is now, the sky full of ugly and very dangerous bugs. I have to stop now and

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give the firm their due.

Buber wrote: Murdi has a sort of reputation here. I've heard of him because I see a lot of stuff from London. It's hard to have a London reputation here in New York. Most of the Englishmen have to come over here and build their own fires. I'm glad to read that Murdi isn't one of those mean bastards. He probably has to keep pretty good control over himself to keep from becoming one. It's a helluva reputation to have if you like to go to parties. He knows something about you and Lenny. But I wouldn't talk to him about it. Just listen. This is the time of life for you for listening. I never had the good sense to go through a period of listening. Your last day in London sounds too improbable for me. You know you're becoming a kind of legend to me. I don't ever expect to see you again in the flesh. You seem to be making a successful transition into reputation. I envy you for it. I've now shifted from Bennington girls to Vassar girls who are far more stiff and far more expectant and who have a tendency to weep at absolutely the wrong times, but they are meticulous about their orgasms. I stay away from what I call the N.Y. muscle women. They demand a ritual short of high mass. This has become a town for lizzies and self-assured faggots. They dominate the high life and make everybody else feel worried. The war continues to be reported in box scores of dead and wounded. I'm as anxious as you are to know if Lenny will be able to get away for your furlough. I haven't had enough experience with married women to know. The ones I know are about as cold-blooded as their husbands. I'm sorry to sound so pissed off. But I feel waste now. A terrific sense of waste. Like

going to the PX when you just want to lie in the sack and sleep. It's incredible how I find myself missing the Army. I'm beginning to like this hotel room. But I have to move out. The night man is forcing me to bribe him with tips and it'll be cheaper to find an apartment. I wouldn't worry too much about what Murdi says about American writers. He probably hasn't read a book in years. Incidentally, it's becoming very fashionable now to be critical of America.

Nora wrote: I received your £5 note and I acknowledge it as first payment received on the £35 purchase price of the portrait of Lenny as exhibited with the London Painters. There is no charge for the exhibition of Lenny at the Dog and Duck. Augustus John said you got the better painting. He took me aside and said it's time I joined the human race. He said he doesn't like the stories he's heard about me. He said the world is only interested in painters as people when they're already dead. I listened with the respect I always give John but what am I to do first? He said I should get together a group of paintings for a show. I told him I have no paintings for a show. Then, he said, paint some. And so I've been in my flat painting. And I've decided to begin a book on Fitzroy Street. This time I will tell the truth, which is about all that I have left to tell. It's very melancholy these days in London. The doodlebugs are no longer doodlebugs. They're nasty and ugly. They erupt like boils. The pubs are generally deserted. No one dares to speak above a whisper. For there is a rumor that a sudden swish can be heard before the new ones explode, at least giving you time to dive under a table or to the pavement. I threw myself to the pavement two days ago,

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right in the middle of Windmill Street. I heard a swish. But it turned out to be a horse urinating. I've told you some secrets which are not so much secrets as embarrassments. So please consider them accordingly. I hear that furloughs are being canceled. My sea captain told me that the coast of England is now so filled with ships that it's almost possible to walk to France. I suspect the invasion will come any day. I hope you're not asked to die in it. I remember in the First World War all the young men expected to die. And in this war no one expects to die. It's all too strange for me. I'll stick to John's advice and paint what I can.

Later Lenny wrote: I saw the invasion this morning en route to work. I looked up into the sky and saw a stream of airplanes, endless airplanes, flying in a great column. It was fascinating until you realized what it was about. And later the streets were strangely quiet. I had always expected a great whooping in London when the invasion actually started. But no. Everybody went meticulously about their work, as though we were all part of some forgotten legend that said we must continue our daily work no matter what, for if we looked up from our work the world would all vanish. I haven't prayed in years but I did walk over to St. Martin's to say a few good words for the twentieth century. This is, after all, our century. I hate to sound so depressing. But I'm not given much choice these days. The one choice I can make I've made. When you can get leave, let's go to Cornwall. It's very beautiful and will probably remain so longer than most things on earth.

Nora asked me to come into London to see her. "It's silly," she wrote, "and it's nothing I can put in a letter but I would like you to come in and see me. I hope you can get passes again. I don't understand why the fighting is still going on. I thought it would all end with the invasion. I see Lenny. But she doesn't confide in me any more so I have no news for you on that score. Murdi was taken with you. He said you're the first person who has listened to him in the past five years, and he goes around calling you his first American friend. I don't know how your captain arranges things but if you can come on the 10th it would be nice of you. My sea captain was drowned."

I hurried into London on the 10th, catching the early-morning train.

Nora had her fireplace lit. The windowpane had been replaced. The floor had been swept. The soot on the railing leading up to her flat had been wiped. The three-legged table had a bowl of flowers. Lenny's picture wasn't on the easel. The magazines were stacked in a pile by the rack of paintings. I saw three large, gilded frames. The photograph of Modigliani still shone like an ikon. And a sketch by Pascin, very small but very Pascin, was next to Modigliani's photograph. On the wall by

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the replaced windowpane was a brilliant orange painting and when Nora saw me look for the name she said, "I did it.

"It's new. It's not finished. It's Mousehole in Cornwall. I stayed there for two weeks in 1915. I never forgot the sunrise on the 15th of June. Suddenly I saw this big ball of flame rising swiftly into the sky overtaking everything, hanging magically by itself. You must know that triumphant look of the sun. I picked up those frames last Sunday on Petticoat Lane. I bargained with a miserable Turk who thought I was a dealer from Museum Street. Later he bought me an ale and told me that he had found the frames dumped in the trash on Half Moon Street."

Nora's hair was brushed. Her hands looked magnificent when clean. Her stockings were straight. She wore a dress, pale green, falling loose from her shoulders, caught up by a belt. I had never seen Nora in a dress. She always wore her twisted tweed suit, blouses that seemed flung on in a hurry. She had fitted herself into the paraphernalia of a woman and it was wonderful that it looked good on her. I realized I had brought into the room some of the urgency of her letter but Nora seemed to have forgotten the letter. Except the room had been prepared. For an instant I thought she might want to exchange me for her dead sea captain. I reached into my pocket and took out two pound notes.

"The rent," I said.

"Yes, into the copy of *Horizon* it goes. Leming has a new story out. It's a terrible story about a pilot who has to bail out over Switzerland and he becomes a ski instructor and there's a wild rumor about from Wardour

Street that it may be made into a movie. Leming is half crazy with the rumor. I can see a fat kind of success in Leming, he knows not to bewilder people, not to frighten them, stir them, and he manages to give off the impression that money is not so important to him as making others feel that they got their money's worth somehow. I think being homosexual has been good for him. It gives him an air of being available. The money will ruin him but that's gone anyway. Has he ever made an all-out, out-right pass at you?"

"No."

"You should go once with Leming. I don't mean to bed. But the East End. He knows it almost as well as Arthur Morrison. But how I don't know. Probably because there's nothing much to really know about the East End."

Nora opened the pack of Chesterfield cigarettes I had put on the mantel. I crossed the room to light her cigarette. She saw me look at her polished fingernails and smiled.

"Lenny did them for me. I wanted my nails done. I dislike cutting my own nails. I hear people bury their cuttings. Why would they do it? But I know why I wanted my nails done up. I told Lenny to come up for lunch. I gave her a terrible lunch. Just a tin of fish. Lenny cut my nails, filed them, and put this polish on. I told Lenny I wanted the polish because I hadn't had polish on my nails in eleven years. Eleven years ago was 1915. It was the final time that I gave Paris a try. I knew I couldn't live in Paris. I left Paris in September 1915. I had a silly exhibition of pictures and no one was even buying good pictures then. I came back to London and

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decided I would never go back to Paris. In London I had my nails done, I bought a coat at Harrod's, I went up north to visit the remains of my family, and I realized before the polish was dry on my nails that London had to be my home. It was one of the most extraordinary thoughts that had ever occurred to me, that I had to have a home."

Nora's hand went up to her hair, brushing back her hair that didn't need brushing, a gesture I seldom saw her make. A gesture that seemed to be universal among women, why I didn't know, except that it always seemed to make them look helpless.

"How is Lenny?" I asked.

"Does she write to you?"

"About once a week."

"She writes well, Lenny. I used to tell her to try some stories for one of the magazines. But Lenny never wanted to get involved. She wants to be a woman, you know, nothing more, and very little less. When I was in that silly boarding school in Devon I used to spend half my time wondering why people were born either a man or a woman and the other half of my time trying to find out the differences. I still haven't. It's exquisite how we're made."

Nora moved to the fireplace and lifted a doll off the mantel. Nora turned the doll and the doll began to sing, "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to you."

"This doll," Nora said, "is exactly 37 years old. They made music boxes to last then. This doll, meaning me, as your Mr. Runyon puts it, was made exactly 54 years

ago today. I think I'm entitled to fifteen seconds of sentiment."

Nora put the doll back on the mantel, patting its black hair. "I used to make dolls in Paris," Nora said; "not really dolls, but sculptured pieces. The American tourists bought them and they're probably in New York and places like Chicago now. That was when the Africans took over Paris. Everything had to look distorted. Big lips, long thin necks, enormous hands, the eyes painted out. I used to ask Modigliani what he saw in the Africans. In translation he would say, They made distortion practical. And when I began to see the painters erasing everything practical and using just color, I saw that painting didn't matter any more and painters were beginning to consider themselves more important than their pictures. I should open a little shop on Baker Street and make my dolls all over again. I get such a hunger these days for a little shop. I don't wonder why whores put aside their money for lodging houses and pubs. Do you think it would be practical for me to emigrate to New York, if the war ever ends?"

Nora sat in her Victorian chair, looking at me for an answer to her next journey.

"New York is a rough place," I said immediately. "What would you want in New York that you can't get here in London? That would be the first thing to know."

"I think," Nora said, "I think very seriously that I'm beginning now to prepare for dying. Just at this age. You know how I mean it. Dying has to have some meaning. I don't mean I suddenly want to become one of those beaded English ladies who go to psychical meetings. I

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meant what I said the other day about a big sunny house in Chelsea and people telephoning me to come for tea. But how in the world am I going to get that? There's no one left to die in my family who could possibly leave me any money. Augustus John said for me to paint. Well, I have been painting. But I never expected more from painting than my amazement at the finished canvas. I would like to go on a journey. I think I'm at the age for a journey. Now begins the conscious journey. I'm telling you all this because I happen to think that you understand exactly what I'm saying even if you haven't the faintest idea of what that understanding is. What would it cost me to live in New York?"

"The cheapest would be a room for \$4 a week, that's almost a pound. If you have a room with cooking, food can be cheap. You can live in New York on practically no money. Tens of thousands of people do."

"What happens to ladies like me in New York?"

"Some rot." Nora smiled. "Some make it. It depends on how they link themselves, to a job, an income, a neighborhood, a flat, a building, the main reading room of the 42nd Street Library, feeding pigeons, smiling at little children, visits to cemeteries, work. I had a fantastic opportunity to see them. Every ten years the government counts all of the people in the United States. It's called the census. I got a job taking the census in New York in 1940. I got assigned to buildings in the East Fifties of New York and in the residential hotels on the West Side where there was an incredible concentration of ladies living alone on business, insurance, all kinds of annuities. I went into their rooms, because the job gave me that right. I had to ask each one of them a lot of

questions. I saw them up to the age of 94. You can't break the link. That's what I saw. One lady showed me a chess set she bought in India in 1908 carved out of ivory. One lady showed me a pine desk that had been in her family since 1810. One lady remembered the funeral train of Abraham Lincoln. One lady poured me some cognac that she had brought from Paris in 1912. One lady visited Tolstoy. One lady told me how she read *Crime and Punishment* when it first came out in translation. Some had been waitresses, teachers, governesses, maids, sales-ladies, their men all dead. It was a funny world of no living men. One lady showed me a photograph of her husband when he posed with a tribe of Indians from South Dakota in 1887. What do you do with these photographs, she asked me, when you know you're going to die? They all talked about death. Dying for them seemed to mean a rest. I'll never forget one lady. She lived on West 112th Street in front of St. John's Cathedral. That's the biggest cathedral in New York. She said Gabriel is on top of the cathedral, why doesn't he blow his horn for me, why doesn't he come for me, why do I have to wait for him, why, she said, and when Gabriel comes, what will I say to him? I think I'll have to thank him for coming. One lady told me, she was 89, she was as thin as a blade of grass, she shivered like a blade of grass in the wind when she got off her chair to get me a glass of water, she told me, and smiled when she said it, saying, I know this won't go into the census, but I find it so strange that I can still hold in my head all of the history of the world, all of the distant places I've been and not been to, that I can still sit in this chair and look out of the window and see the sun and the moon when they

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come around. I think, she said, that we people living are more important than we take ourselves to be, that eternity, she said, is in us, for there would be no eternity unless we said there is. I used to leave those buildings with my head bursting open."

"My God," Nora said, "I thought only God was supposed to see that sort of thing."

The afternoon had come. A great gray slanting sky with the London black brick edging upward. The Dillons' house lay shattered. The sky train of gliders I had seen over the base had landed in France. Half the men in the gliders would never have to worry about eternity. They were part of it already. Nora moved to the couch from her Victorian chair. A new spread was on the couch, purchased in Petticoat Lane. She had listened and not listened to me as I spoke, for she moved restlessly to the couch, patting the couch, pulling up the madras cover. Nora got up from the couch. She looked about the room, as though remembering why she had cleaned out the fireplace, stacked the magazines, hung her red-orange painting of the sun in Mousehole in 1937. There was no light in the room, just the remembered light of the early part of the afternoon, when the sun, clouded, but still the sun, had lit the swept floor, had given Nora an unbroken line. And as she stood now, I could see her body, which was what she wanted me to see, for she brought herself forward toward me.

Nora's hands were on me. She brought me over to the couch. She went down on the couch. She lay back on the couch, and said, "I know, I know, I know it's silly," and reached for my hand, bringing me down on the couch and I could feel her legs twisting under me.

"Just let me. Let me. Let me do it all. Let me. Let me do it all. Later you can." Just let me. Let me. Let me." I lay there. Hearing Nora's voice. She talked through it all. Telling me to lie still, still, not to move, just to let her move, and she took her legs down from my back and arched them backward, rocking herself back and forth, saying, "I know, I know, I know, I do know, I do know, it's the knowing, the knowing, knowing, knowing and snowing, my God, do you know that out of all the billions and billions of snowflakes no two are ever alike, never, not from the very first beginning of the earth, what an extraordinary earth, it's under my back, we should be down on the floor, that's where it was meant to be done, what are we doing, really, this is the doing, quick, quick, and it's done!"

Nora went to the fireplace. "Do you have twopence?" she asked me. "For the fire," she added.

I gave Nora twopence. She put the coins in the slot. The gas shot up. She put her hands in front of the fire.

"What did Prometheus get for giving us fire?" she asked me.

"His liver torn out," I said.

"Good," she said. "Prometheus, Pandora, Perseus, Phaëthon, Jason, I had a governess who read them all to me, from when I was 5 to 6, buried in blankets, hot tea, cookies with jam, and Prometheus with his liver torn out. But how many livers did he have? I remember asking Mrs. Hollis. Ho! I remember her laughing, you'd be surprised. Tell me, I asked her. You eat your biscuits and jam and get to sleep, there'll be time for you to know how many livers you have."

I went to the three-legged table and poured two water

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glasses of Marsala. Nora smiled. "I didn't invite you to London on the 10th to do that," she said. "That," she said, holding the wine toward the couch.

I looked toward the couch, empty of the two of us, the Madras scarf on the floor.

Nora sat in the chair by the window. "The Dillons were always so prompt about getting their blackout curtains up. I still think of that afternoon. Lenny was angry at me, wasn't she?"

"No."

"But cold. Lately she's been cold to me. I think she's afraid of following in my tracks. But she's too sensible and hasn't had my start. She'll know when to stop. I like Lenny. I hope you do. Do you?"

Nora didn't want an answer. She went to the window and looked out. The sky was past dusk, just going into night. The drone of planes was in the sky. But no sirens. The lights were going on in the blocks of flats. The invasion seemed to have pushed up the blackout. A fine thin rain, blown by the sudden wind, sent us away from the window. I dropped the blanket across the window, blacking out Nora's window as she switched on her wrought-iron lamp.

"Rain too," Nora said. "Didn't one of your American poets say that she would like to hear the rain on her grave? What a funny thing to settle for. If you had one wish, my dear Paul, having taken the American census and seen what people can make of themselves, what would you wish for? I wrote you that my sea captain is dead. His remarkable fishing boat got strafed by a German plane. He got a whole burst of bullets in him, enough to kill a dozen whales, and they had to drop him

overboard. Now the fish have eaten him. He used to tell me that he had taken his living out of the sea and he wanted to have his body thrown into the sea, to settle up, as he put it. Think of a codfish nibbling on my eyes, he used to say to me, think of that great banquet I will make. I can't replace him and I hate to think of finding substitutes for him."

Nora saw me look toward the couch. "Now!" she said, "tell me what we did on that bed!"

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Don't worry about Nora, Buber wrote, she knew exactly what she was doing. Your captain cut out two or three lines of your letter and you can fill me in when the war ends. The Germans are fighting now with the pure classic war instinct and it can't last long. The Germans absolutely don't know what to do with themselves and so they continue to fight. The stories of the concentration camps have broken in the papers here. I don't think we will ever know what really went on in the camps. It's the kind of human experience that always gets clouded up. I think it's extraordinary that the Germans were able to bring it off, but then they had the help of the rest of the world. The people I see here in New York are waiting for the death of Hitler like kids waiting to see the bad man finally get it. I think if I didn't get laid by a fresh young Vassar girl every weekend I'd probably start doing pieces for the *Saturday Evening Post*. I have a new girl friend now. She's the daughter of one of the most famous writers in America. I won't mention her name because it might slip out. Her father is/was a kind of cloudy hero for me once. She loves getting it and I once caught her picking her nose while I was deep in her. She told me she feels she has about two or three good

years before she settles down in Rockland State Hospital. I'm working on a long piece now about Henry James. I'm saying that some of the scenes in *The Bostonians* are the greatest Lesbian writing in American literature and better than anything Proust brought off. I showed your letter on Nora to some people and it may get published, if you want it to. What about Lenny? Why don't you push for a furlough and get away with Lenny? Some women are put on this earth just to let men know what it's all about. And I have a suspicion that may fit Lenny. But you know better than I do. Don't envy me here in New York. I'm getting old in the wrong way. I hope the end of the war will have some surprises for me. I can predict that we'll wind up loving the Germans and Japanese when this is all over. And since this war is like a great big family quarrel, that's the way it should be. I'm beginning to like my letters to you. When I read them over I wonder why I can't get into James with the same directness. Maybe it's because I know what I'm doing on James is James, and I can't write myself off so easily. I'm beginning to find existence more interesting than anything else. But to stay busy and not get sucked in is the great trick. I understand now the great fascination of the theater. There is always a curtain. And in life of course there's never a curtain. We never know. Which fascinated Joyce and drove him crazy enough to write *Finnegans Wake*. I'm waiting now for my Vassar girl. She never wears underpants and she's always a little runny when I get to her. Which isn't bad except that I think she plays with herself in the john before I get to her. I think after tonight I'll send her back to her history professor. Nora said some

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great stuff to you in bed. You're lucky to remember it. Don't forget that Nora was laid by Modigliani and he was probably your age when it happened. That's history. Get after your captain.

22

Lenny and I hurried for the Cornish train in Paddington Station as though we were fleeing London. I carried my duffel bag swung up on my shoulder. Lenny only had her purse. We ran toward the Cornish train, catching it as the long train began to stir for the long ride. We found a compartment with two seats facing each other. I swung my duffel bag up on the luggage rack and then we sat back, looking at each other, and when the great train stirred, Lenny leaned forward and took up my hands and kissed them.

It was dusk when we got to Penzance. We went directly to a big old hotel, The Bristol Arms, and I asked for a room that would look out on the Atlantic. A chambermaid took us up to a huge room with a bathroom big enough to be a latrine. I gave the chambermaid a half-crown tip. Lenny washed and we went down into the dining room, a vast empty white starched room, empty except for a British major who sat alone drinking from a bottle of wine.

We sat down at a table by the window, a heavily curtained window. A lithograph of Trafalgar Square hung in the panel alongside the window. The waitress brought us the menu and I ordered a bottle of wine. Lenny said the fish should be good. We ordered fillet of sole. The

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waitress opened the bottle of wine. The tablecloth was very white and very heavy. The silverplate looked as though it had been bought before the Crimean War.

The British major smiled at us. I waved hello to him. He got up, bringing his bottle of wine.

"I hope you don't mind if I pour you a drink before you begin on yours. I brought back three bottles of these from Italy."

"No," I said.

The major poured us each a full glass of red wine with bubbles.

"It's not champagne," he said, "nor burgundy. It's just good. Well, cheers."

"It's good, very good," Lenny said.

"Are you staying here?" the major asked. "You'll like it. They serve a great breakfast with bacon that you can't usually get in London."

"Just for a day probably," I told the major.

"Then you must go on to Wadwich. It's a fishing village where you can usually rent the top floor of a fisherman's cottage. I've got a name for you if you like. It's nicer than St. Ives or Mousehole or those places. You should have a car for Cornwall. Or a cart. And be careful on the cliffs. The winds come up suddenly and down you can go. Here's the name." The major handed us a card and wrote, "Wadwich, James Dunn."

"How is it in Italy?" I asked the major.

"The Italians are sensible. Not much has been destroyed that didn't need destroying, like London. The Germans will have to come back as tourists to really conquer Italy. And you don't conquer places like Italy. Just as the Germans never conquered Paris. Can you

imagine the British in Moscow? Or the Americans in Berlin?"

The major filled our glasses. He wore an elegant uniform and a magnificent pair of shoes. He carried a swagger stick.

"Cheers," I said.

"Yes, here's to you. I like your American toasts. The Americans did a lot of unnecessary dying in Italy. You fellows fight so seriously, yet you take everything else with a nonchalance that I marvel at. I taught for a year at Princeton. It's amazing how many Americans are so proud of the fact that America has never lost a war. I suspect that simple notion makes it possible for men to wade out of those ugly little landing ships. Right now I know more dead Americans than I know live ones. On leave?" the major asked me.

"Yes. Ten days."

"Good. You picked the only spot in England where the earth and the sky don't alienate each other. This is the only spot in Western Europe where history is the least important thing. The rest of Europe is ugly now. You can't imagine how ugly, nor how ugly it will remain." The major swayed and I guessed that he was quietly drunk. "I taught history at Princeton. And now there's no more history to teach. We have to unlearn history." The major picked up his bottle of wine. He went across the room to the black upright piano. He put his bottle of wine on top of the piano and sat down playing, picking out with one finger, "Waltzing Matilda," and when he ended Matilda, he picked out with one finger, "Someone to Watch Over Me." "I was in New York when Gertrude Lawrence sang it," he called out to us, "a boy

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then, studying history, and she came out on the stage holding a rag doll. I'm going to write a history book for children and call it *The Rag Doll*." The major put both his hands on the keyboard and began playing musical-comedy songs from the 1920s.

I poured Lenny a full glass from our bottle of cold white wine.

The waitress brought in our fillet of sole.

The phone rang, echoing, unanswered, and Lenny turned toward the ringing phone as though the call might be for her, London. She turned back to me and smiled. "Let's eat this fillet of sole," she said, "and then go out to the ocean."

The major was still playing when we left the dining room. Penzance was blacked out. The moon lit the streets. We walked toward the quays, through narrow streets lined with shops, and when we came to the water, the Atlantic, Lenny took my hand, and we walked on the quays, as close as we could get to the water, listening to the water slap against the rocks.

We followed the quayside and turned into the wet streets that led back to The Bristol Arms.

The lobby was quiet. The dining room silent. We walked up the heavy carpeted stairs to our room and when I switched the light on in our room, I saw a folded note on the floor.

"Wadwich," the major wrote.

"I think we have to go there," Lenny said.

"We can find out in the morning how to get there."

"That's the morning."

Lenny opened her arms. For the first time in my life I saw what I always knew existed, the fullness of a person,

the space that rises up around us into the extraordinary air and light and the height that has no end. the fullness that inhabits the earth and gives it a voice, that forces itself to be heard, and that exists in itself, which is all the universe must be, and if there is more, it can only be more of the same, but we don't know, and that is why we live, and that is why our voice is never still.

A rumbling woke me during the night. For an instant I thought it might be a rocket missile, rumbling, finding us not in London, but in Cornwall, sputtering in the sky to fall on our naked bodies. I saw Lenny's breasts, pushed up by her arm, her dazzling breasts, that I had sucked as though my existence once again depended on suckling. I bent down and kissed her thighs, the thighs that bent me into her. Lenny stirred when she felt my lips on her thighs. She stirred like a leaf expecting the wind to howl against its bough. I would have raised her legs and kissed her but she looked deep in a delicious sleep and I didn't want to disturb her. But quietly I kissed her thighs. And I looked almost in disbelief at the curve of her hips, which is certainly the curved half of the universe we see bending into itself.

The rumbling was a ship's horn, rumbling again, three loud rumbles. Nora's dead sea captain. Nora told me the happiest day of her life was at Wapping in London. She sat on the dock with her sea captain and he played his harmonica and sang sea songs. She said he played his harmonica as though the sea would rise and fall and follow after him. She told me the news of his death was brought to her by a first mate who fumbled a little when he saw that she was the person to whom he was bringing the news of the death and she said, Yes, yes, thank you,

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to put him at ease. And when the first mate left she screamed for the first time in her life.

More ships rumbled. Lenny stirred. Still in her sleep she opened her thighs, lifting them for me, and I went into her quietly, quietly going in and out of her, as quiet as her breathing, until she awoke, and dug her nails into me and her tongue into my mouth. Her face was wet with tears and I didn't dare ask her why, but continued what I had started, until Lenny was still again, and she went to sleep, her arms around me, her body damp, and I brought the starched sheet up around us.

In the morning we ate breakfast in the vast empty dining room. I looked for the major but the waitress told me he had eaten already and had left to cycle to Mousehole. We had porridge, hot tea, the great bacon the major had described, and a boiled egg.

Lenny looked wonderful. She had bathed while I went downstairs to look at Penzance in the daylight. I learned where to catch the bus for St. Ives and found out that Wadwich was a small fishing village on the tip of Cornwall almost within walking distance of Land's End. Buber had written me to look up a painter that he said was one of the finest painters alive in the world, Richard Eddington, and he lived about an eighth of an inch away from Wadwich on the map. Buber wrote that Eddington was one of the few painters alive who knew why he was painting an abstract picture. Buber wrote that Eddington didn't have an American reputation but he was known in England and when I mentioned his name to Lenny she knew him immediately and told me that he had exhibited with Nora in the London Painters' show.

We left Penzance immediately after breakfast. Lenny bought a heavy wool fisherman's sweater and clothes that she couldn't pack in our sudden decision to leave London. We had rushed from the Sobranie Bar on Wardour Street to Paddington Station, telephoning from the Sobranie to get the time of the next train for Cornwall. The Sobranie was a private bar on Wardour Street, up a long flight of stairs that opened into a horseshoe bar, five tables, and Mary Ellen, who was famous because she had slept with King Edward VII. Mary said go to Cornwall. John Fitts, who always sat at the end of the bar, said go to Cornwall. Lenny said, Let's go, let's go, but now. We rushed down the steps of the Sobranie. I picked up my duffel bag at the Regent Palace Hotel, and we rushed toward Paddington Station as though all London might cry out that we couldn't go.

We boarded the bus for St. Ives and as soon as the bus left Penzance I began to see what I expected to see in Cornwall, the great sky, the low-lying rolling land, the clarity the ocean brings to the land and sky, the clarity that gave birth to the wonderful myth that we see all of our life pass in review as we go down drowning, and for an instant, life is recognizable.

Mousehole was only four miles out of Penzance, St. Ives a longer ride.

Lenny said, "St. Ives is too pretty, too pretty."

We looked out of the bus window. A fishing village came into view with high cliffs, the sea sloping in, the cottages spread protectively around the curve of the bay.

"Let's get off," I said.

Lenny agreed. The bus driver pulled up to a stop for us. We got off and there on the road was a man with a

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cart. I asked if he was going down to the village. Yes, he said, come along. I put my duffel bag in the cart and Lenny and I got into the cart. The horse moved slowly, going down the road toward the village. The houses of the village came into view. They looked as though they had been built into the earth, to withstand forever the gales that swept in from the Atlantic. And above the village, away toward the sea, in fantastic clarity, were the cliffs. I asked the driver if he knew where we could stay.

"Yes," he said, "there's a place. I'll take you to them. The name is Cummings. You can see their house now, it's the one with the red roof."

Mr. Cummings came to the door, a big man, wearing black corduroys, a heavy knitted sweater.

"How long will you stay?" he asked.

"I have ten days' leave."

"That'll be all right, if you want to spend it all. You measure out the days of leave, I remember. Let me show you up."

The house had walls as thick as the Tower of London. The living-room ceiling was low. A great stone fireplace filled one wall. The sea was in the middle of the window, the tide roaring in. A brass telescope was on the table facing the sea, a pair of binoculars. A tangled fishing net lay on a long oak table. Cummings led the way up the stairs into a wide low sweeping room with a high bed, held up by four towering posts. Two bright quilts were folded at the foot of the bed. The night table held a huge white pitcher and a wash basin. The windows looked out on the sea. And sweeping away from the

curve of the bay we could see the cliffs, standing like chessmen.

"It's lovely," Lenny said.

"You'll be taking your meals too," Cummings said.
"There's no place else to eat."

"Good," I said.

"The missus will be back soon if there's something you need. Just make yourself at home from now on in."

"Fine," I said. I offered Cummings a cigarette. And he said, "And I hope you don't mind if I make myself at home with these things, it's terrible to get used to the taste of American cigarettes. One other thing. Be careful on the cliffs and the water. The winds come up suddenly and bigger men than myself have been blown into the sea when they didn't want to be," and he left us alone.

Lenny stood and waited for me to come to her. The window snapped open, banging against the wall. Lenny turned, startled, just as she had turned when the telephone rang in Penzance. But this time she didn't smile. "I don't want to run any more," she said, "not until we get back." Lenny turned and shut the window. I caught a glimpse of the cliffs, massive, an unbroken sweep, high enough to tower over the sea. Lenny turned from the window, towering over herself, her gesture deliberate, and she came toward me, her mouth, the mouth Nora told me to look for, her mouth parted, the lips full, the mouth, the mouth, her mouth was on me, for the first time on me, and I trembled as her mouth reached me. I couldn't stop the trembling, her mouth was like a trembling puppy, like a frightened infant bird I had once picked up.

The first morning in Cummings' second-floor room was fantastic. I saw a big red sun climb out of the earth. The sun rushed toward the towering blue, the blue reserved only for the earth. The cliffs woke up to the sun. I saw them rearing out of the quick dawn. I saw the sea keep its partnership with the land. The sea that remained at the edge of the land, its immense swoop breaking into white-capped leaden reminders of the long rain.

Lenny woke up naked and beautiful. I turned from the sea-capped window and saw Lenny's breasts. I went climbing over the bed and caught hold of Lenny. Lenny said, Remember the woods at your air base, the girl going up and down? I said yes. Lenny climbed over me. She kissed me as she climbed over me. She mounted me, looking directly down into my face. Lenny smiled, and said, I never liked that girl, she looked so frightened. Lenny rose up on me and then settled herself down on me. She rolled back and forth, kissing my hands. I reached up and pulled Lenny down to me. We could hear the sea breaking on the shore. The cry of the morning sea gulls. Cummings yelling to his wife to hurry with the fire. I saw a sea gull fly past the window. I saw the sun right in the middle of the window and

then go up higher. Lenny rose higher on me. She towered over me. She came down slowly on me. I rose up to meet her. We rolled back and forth like the earth that turns only to stand still. We came to the stillness.

Cummings gave us a big breakfast. Mrs. Cummings sliced four huge slices of bacon for us. I gave Mrs. Cummings a tin of coffee I had put in my duffel bag. Cummings said we could follow the cliffs to Land's End or go across the downs. Cummings said the downs was better. Mrs. Cummings made us a lunch, two big cheese sandwiches, two boiled eggs, a tomato. Lenny put on her fisherman's sweater. I put on my old GI sweater. I put the sandwiches in my musette bag and we started off. First we went down to look at the boats, the fishermen mending their nets, the children who had never seen a doodlebug. A wind started up. Cummings said to be careful on the cliffs. I said we would.

We started toward Land's End. The sky was immense. The ground was flat, rocky, wild. The wind pushed us along. The wind whistled, whistling off the telephone wires, a sound I have never heard before, a high shrieking cry, like the death of a thousand eagles. I asked Lenny if she wanted to go back, to sit in the pub, and Lenny said no, it was only three miles across the downs. We scrambled down a rocky hill, stumbled over the sharp rocks, caught our clothes on the sharp edged roots, fought the wind, the wind that began to push the breath out of us. We had to yell to hear each other. The whistling didn't stop. The shrieking wind roared overhead, a sound that belonged in music but no audience could sit through the cry. We caught glimpses of the vast cliffs. They stretched in great unbroken ramparts. I felt as

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though we were walking on the top of the world, the Tibetan highlands. We had to fight the wind. The wind shifted. It pushed against us. We pushed forward, stooped under. Lenny stumbled. I caught her. I tore my pants. Lenny cut her hand. Look! Lenny cried out. Lenny pointed to the Atlantic. The ocean flung itself against the rocks. Great waves, leaden, heavy, swooping up, broke against the rocks, piling up against the rocks, the water rearing up like wild horses. We can't go too close, I yelled to Lenny. We turned away from the downs, toward the cliffs. We came within 30 feet of the cliffs. I could feel the wind lifting at my feet, trying to raise my feet off the ground. Lenny held on to my hand. The wind almost downed Lenny. We didn't go to the edge of the cliff. We turned back to the downs, the land gray and black, the sky a smoky gray, the sun trying to burst through. The wind grew more fierce. We could no longer suck in our breath. The wind flew into us. We turned our back to the wind and pushed toward the hill that Cummings told us would tell us we were almost in sight of Land's End. I saw the hill. Lenny pointed to the hill. We pushed toward the hill. The whistling of the wind was louder now than the death of a thousand eagles. The wind was as loud as Lenny crying to me in bed I love you I love you and my own trembling of what to do with the love.

We saw Land's End. It looked like Land's End. The jagged rocks extended out into the roaring sea. We rushed toward the rocks and water. The waves breaking against the rocks were fantastic. The waves climbed up the face of the rocks, smashing against them, climbing to tower over the rocks, the waves breaking to claim back the

earth, to bury it again under water. We stood and watched the spectacle. We could only watch.

Lenny and I had a hot cup of tea in the café. I gave Lenny a cheese sandwich. The BBC came on. I expected the dry voice to announce the end of the war. We finished our tea and left to turn back into the downs, to head for Eddington's house. Cummings told us how to find it from Land's End. The waitress at the café knew Eddington. He's a wild fellow, the waitress said, but nice.

Eddington's house had walls 3 feet thick. It was a pub that he had turned into a house. He looked at me a little amazed when I told him we had walked from Cotwich. He brought out a bottle of Scotch. "So Buber likes my work," he said. "Well, I like Buber, he's one of the few men around who isn't afraid to write about painting; anyhow, he makes writing about painting more difficult than painting, which is the way it should be."

"We haven't met?" Eddington asked Lenny. Lenny handled it beautifully. "We met," Lenny said, "but only you weren't there." Eddington liked that and didn't give Lenny any more questioning looks. Eddington took the bottle of Scotch and led us into his studio. "My work-room," he called it, "it used to be the wine room of the pub till I extended it. And this is what I do," he said, pointing to his paintings on the rough whitewashed walls, "when I'm not glued to a telescope on the cliffs waiting to see if the Germans are going to come in through the hard underbelly of England. I've looked at that sea for four years now. I know the whales, the sharks, the porpoises, the rocks, the gales, the wrecks, I've seen everything but Germans. They never intended to attack

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England. The idiots. I came up here to paint. Painting is a bloody nuisance if you're not famous. So Buber thinks I'm famous. I feel better about that. It's only the famous painters who know what they're doing. I'm not very charitable toward slobbering painters. Painting is a serious business, like fucking, and too many people do both just for amusement."

Eddington gave us each a half a water glass of whisky. "Can you stay for dinner?" he asked. "It was probably a lot of fun hiking here but it'll be nasty going back. It's sure to rain. And if you stay for dinner, you can stay for the night. There's plenty of space. I'll ring up the pub and have them tell your Cummings that you're all right. Is that all right with you?"

Eddington's wife made a fabulous dinner. She set a formal table with a white linen tablecloth. She used her ration of meat to prepare a roast. Eddington opened a bottle of French wine that he said he had been saving for the German invasion. I liked Mrs. Eddington. She fitted herself right into Eddington but kept enough of herself out of him. Like Eddington, she had a face that showed no concern for age. "I'm 44," Eddington told us, "and I love it. I love this getting old. I think we get closer and closer to things like rocks and mountains and those bloody fucking stars, they're the things that get me, and I don't believe a word of astronomy, I think it's as much a mythology as the names we give to the stars."

"But they are billions and billions of miles apart and there are billions and billions of them," Mrs. Eddington said.

"Balls!" Eddington said. "They're only there because we say they're there, which doesn't mean that they're

not there in the sky. But it does mean that we make them stars. I read in the *National Geographic* that there are over three hundred thousand different kinds of beetles. How many of us are there?" Eddington asked. "Two billion, three billion, and how many dead, six billion, what if each one of us is a dead star in the dead sky, and the precious living, what we're doing right now, is that the all of it? Who else is there to say what it is all about except ourselves?"

"And if you're right?" Lenny asked.

Eddington gave Lenny a wonderful smile.

Mrs. Eddington poured from the bottle of red wine. For dessert I opened my musette bag and took out two bars of Nestlé chocolate.

"Wonderful!" Eddington said. He broke off a hunk of chocolate.

We went from the dinner table into Eddington's studio.

"So you know Nora. I first met Nora on Fitzroy Street in somebody's house. I like Nora. I think she was silly to get involved in painting. It's not a business for women. You need a ding dong to paint. Nobody believes women know anything about the world. That's not their business. And the *women* women know it. And these other bloody women are forcing half of the men in England to become homosexual. That's part of the death instinct in us, homosexuality. That's one of the secrets of the bugging war. We're afraid, we're suddenly all afraid of this thing we created out of ourselves and we've got to give it crisis and balls. Balls to it." Eddington broke off another hunk of the Nestlé bar.

"But still you looked through a telescope up there on

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the cliffs for four years to see if the Germans would come riding in on the waves with their beautifully machined guns," Mrs. Eddington told Eddington.

"I didn't only look for the Germans through my telescope." Eddington tossed his wife the bar of Nestlé's.

"Tell me about Nora," Eddington asked; "how is she now? I know she had a picture hanging with the London Painters. But I didn't get to look at it. I go into London once every six months and then only to see if it still exists."

"She's still living on Fitzroy Street."

"Fitzrovia. I never hated a word as much as I hate the word Fitzrovia. I'd like something good to happen to Nora. Do you think it can?"

"She told me that Augustus John told her to keep painting."

"Which is easy for Augustus John to say."

"He bought a painting from her."

"That's good."

"She needs a pension, Nora. She told me that she would like to become old in a great big house in Chelsea and have famous people call her up for tea. But how can I get it? she asked me. She has an idea about going to New York. I think she wants to sign a treaty of peace with the world but she doesn't know who to call on to negotiate the peace."

"I like that!" Eddington said.

Mrs. Eddington took Lenny into the kitchen. "C'mon, we'll wash the dishes, which I understand is a man's profession in the United States."

"So you know Buber and Nora. Who else do you

know?" Eddington asked me.

"I know Murdi."

"Look at this thing." Eddington pointed to Murdi's drawing on the cover. "Do you like poetry?" Eddington asked me.

"Only when it's very great."

"Of course."

"You don't miss London?" I asked Eddington.

"London doesn't exist. You ought to know that. It's something Dickens invented. Shaw. Edgar Wallace. Sax Rohmer. Even Conrad. Conrad saw the real fictional London. I think that's the reason why your Henry James adopted London. London gave James the best chance he had to listen for the voice in us that gets stopped at the roof of our mouth when we have nothing and everything to say."

"But there have been breakthroughs," I said.

"Only breakthroughs," Eddington said. "We don't listen. The living are too ruthless. That's why dead pictures bring the highest prices. Captain Kidd knew that dead men tell no tales."

Mrs. Eddington brought in a tray of hot tea. "Lenny tells me that you've written some things."

"Not enough to call myself a writer."

"Nonsense!" Eddington said. "You wouldn't be here if you weren't, and Nora wouldn't have given you five minutes of her time if she didn't guess. Nobody expects you to write now. Writing is what we were talking about, the voice that gets stopped at the roof of our mouths. We have to finally deal in words, words we believe."

Eddington pointed his great long finger at Lenny.

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"What do you make of him?" he asked Lenny.

"I love him," Lenny said.

The room with the 3-foot walls was silent. I could hear the wind that almost hurled us off the cliffs. The wind that tore at our throats.

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Lenny picked up the blackout curtain, held it away from the window, then dropped it into place.

"Even here," she said.

The room was cold. Eddington left us a pot of tea with three whiskies in it. The walls were stone. A thick woolen tapestry hung on the windowed wall. The bed was low, ancient, made of thick pieces of wood.

"I always remember," Lenny said, "the runway at your base. Those Fortresses lined up. That terrible long strip of concrete. What a long way. How many miles to Babylon? Threescore miles and ten. Can I get there by candlelight?"

Lenny picked up the curtain again, holding the curtain back, dropping it quickly.

"I did that once in London, during the blitz. I pulled back the curtain and there was London on fire. Mrs. Eddington asked me if we were married. I said I was. I love this feeling of being here, right here, on the tip of the land. You don't mind if I talk on?"

Lenny took some of the steaming whiskied tea.

"I telephoned London yesterday from the pub, in the village. It's an absurd sense of responsibility that I have. Robert said the firm called. He said he had called every hospital in London. He said he checked with some

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ministry to find out if any bombs had fallen on London, if so where, so he could find out if I had been hit by a bomb at this tail end of the war. He said he was told that no bombs had fallen on London. I told him where I was. He asked when I would be back, so he could tell the firm. I said on Tuesday, probably. He said all right. He didn't sound angry. He did seem put out about making all of the telephone calls. He said the morgue invited him down to view the dead bodies that had been collected in London over the past several weeks. But he didn't want to chance it. He said Nora seemed to guess where I was at but she didn't say anything definite, but she seemed to be pleased that I was away. He said the BBC was hinting the war would end any day. The Russians and the Americans were preparing to enter Berlin. He said the BBC seemed to take a great delight in the fact that Berlin was on fire, burning the way the Germans imagined London would burn. It seemed silly to parallel my own going away and return with the end of the war, so I didn't say anything. He said the call was costing a lot of money and when we were about to hang up, he said, Will it be Monday or Tuesday that you'll be back? I had a whisky in the pub and then went down to the beach. I watched the fishermen mending their nets. I watched the little children throwing rocks into the sea. I saw a boat put out, and I was tempted to ask if we could go along. I went from the beach up to the cliffs. I walked along the cliffs. It was delicious. The sea gulls looked so lovely. It was so good not to think about anything except the existence of the earth. It's such a lovely earth, really lovely. I don't think there's any ugly earth."

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Nora wrote: My God, the war is over! What are we to do now? Your silly captain should have never kept you on your base. London was wonderful. We lit great bonfires everywhere. I wanted to set fire to the Dog and Duck and preserve it as a ruin of the war but I was stopped by Malcolm Bridges. You don't know him. He's an awful faggot. Murdi got absolutely pissing drunk. He passed out on the sidewalk in the front of the Three Nuns and was carried shoulder-high into the pub by John Shields, Malcolm Bridges, Shirley Evans, and an unknown Canadian soldier. It looked like the final scene of *Hamlet*. Leming was incredibly drunk. For fifteen minutes he yelled, It's not over, it's not over, you idiots! And then he passed out but not before he had vomited all over himself. I did get a chance to see the mobs in Piccadilly. The Dog and Duck ran out of everything to drink. The bonfires were magnificent. Those I'll never forget. They came on with a wonderful spontaneity. All over London. I started one fire myself. It was extraordinary. To see the flames burst up on Charlotte Street. I managed to get into my bed alone. And when I woke up it was the first day of peace. I promptly emptied my bladder and hurried out to see what London would look like on the first day of peace. And there it was. This

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ugly city. And everywhere the smell of urine. And everywhere the shops began to open. Don't forget to send me my pound note for the room, which I need, and please let me know how the end of this conflagration will now affect your life and mortal happiness, as your Benjamin Franklin would have said.

Buber wrote: I was on the can when the news came over CBS. Nothing could have been more symbolic. I just wish I could believe the war is over. I'll believe it when we start revising our calendars, dating them n.w. The year of No War. The letdown here in the people I know was too much. People look worried again. I pick up some of the old war gaiety when there's talk about the million American casualties it will take to invade Japan. I finished my piece on James. It appeared this month and disappeared just as quick. I gave up my Vassar girl. She got hold of a copy of the *Kama Sutra* and almost put my back into a brace trying the Elephant Tree. I'm more frightened of a slipped disc than being called back into the Army to invade Japan. I expect the Japanese to surrender since they're more intelligent than the Germans. But it's absurd to expect intelligence in this century. This is the last century of instinct. We can't afford another one. Hitler's death was good to the end. But few people believe he's dead. Probably because they don't want to believe he ever lived. There's only one explanation for Hitler. He was pure instinct. And if he had combined instinct with intelligence we might have all gladly suffered the fate of Dachau. Now he's dead, and nature with her extravagant generosity is giving us more chances. I think the rate of chances will be speeded up until we'll finally be forced to bet everything on the

next turn of the earth. But enough of this crap, except that I have no one around here to tell it to. You'll get no audiences in civilian life like in a Nissen hut. What happens to you now? Keep me up to date about Lenny. I thought Lenny was great in Cornwall, and more great on her return to London. It took guts for her. I saw Nora's book on Fourth Avenue and bought it for fifteen cents. I received a nice note from Eddington. He liked you and said he expects some good things from you. I hope you don't forget anything you've learned. I'll miss these V-letters. Congratulations on having come out alive.

26

I went into London to say good-by to Nora and to wonder if I would ever say good-by to Lenny. I took Nora to the Dog and Duck and bought her three double whiskies. Nora walked me to the corner of Tottenham Court Road. She held on to my arm, saying she wasn't drunk, but she was. She said I should be careful how I packed Lenny's painting for shipping to New York. I didn't want to leave Nora drunk on the corner of Tottenham Court Road but she insisted she was all right.

"I got this far," Nora told me, "this far and no farther. It's remarkable why anyone bothers to stay alive. But here we are. Good-by," Nora said, "I don't want to talk, I've done that enough. I feel I should say something to you. I like you, and that's enough, and I will think about you, and that's more important, and remember me, and here we are." Nora kissed me. I watched her go up Tottenham Court Road. She turned once to wave to me. I waved to her, and Nora turned forever into Windmill Street.

I caught a taxi to the Café Royal. Lenny was waiting for me in the foyer. We hurried into the back bar and had a double gin.

Lenny said, "I don't want to sit and eat. Let's walk."

We went into Regent Street, up the great thorough-

fare that had held off the German bombers. We window-shopped, looking into the luscious windows, the creamy cashmeres and the great belted waterproofs. The great red double-decker buses were lined up stopped by the roaring traffic. The sun lit the massive buildings, rising out of the ancient London earth like herds of trumpeting elephants. Bells rang. There was a clash of armor in the air. This was the triumph of the twentieth century. To buy and sell in safety. I had never seen London look so confident. It was the sun. A bright sun high and clear in a magnificent blue sky. The monstrous barrage balloons were gone.

"This all exists for us," Lenny said, "like the National Gallery."

We turned from Regent Street into Oxford Street and Lenny said, "Let's take a cab to St. Paul's."

St. Paul's rose to the top of Ludgate Hill and to the top of London. The stalls of St. Paul's were filled with people still worshipping the peace.

"Peter to Paul," Lenny said. "Let's climb the stairs, all of them, to the windy top. I haven't done it in eight years."

Lenny took my hand as we entered the interior of St. Paul's. We went down the great north nave, toward the massive dome. The distant altar was manned by men.

"Is this really your last day in London?" Lenny asked me. We were out of the great north nave, into the cold stone hall leading to the upper parts of the cathedral.

"If the shipping orders aren't changed."

"Where will they send you?"

"First to the States. Then probably to San Francisco

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for shipment to Japan."

"I keep forgetting the war isn't over. You can't tell them that you want to remain here, or at least in Europe?"

"I asked to stay. But the men who can stay are those who have enough points for a discharge. It's crazy, but men are getting out of the Army now like you get out of a university, on points. I think you need 85 points for a discharge. Battle ribbons count for so much, medals, years of service."

"How many points are you short?"

"Ten. The news is that it may take a million or more dead to invade Japan."

"Just a million. The Japanese won't settle for less. My God, it's fantastic, fantastic."

Lenny leaned against the cold stone wall. We heard the choir, joined by the great packed aisles.

"What if you die?" Lenny said. "No," she said, "you won't die. All the way out, all the way, and what a way. Peter to Paul. Let's go up the stairs and see what they raised to Paul."

We went up the stairway of 143 steps into the Triforium Gallery and with nothing to see we turned back to the staircase and started climbing to the Whispering Gallery. Lenny seemed out of breath. She leaned against the cold stone wall. "How soon do you go?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure. The base is going to be sealed off. No more passes. The men they need in a hurry they're flying back."

"I can't imagine the entire world going to Japan to destroy it. Will all those pretty houses go? The bell towers. The bombings. They may erupt Fujiyama. Japan

can sink into the North China Sea. It's such nonsense for us to talk about Japan and bombings and Fujiyama exploding. Kiss me, please kiss me."

Lenny bit my lips. I caught hold of her tongue. I took her tongue into my mouth. And when I touched her breast, suddenly heavy and different, Lenny brought my hand up to her other breast, and the nipple, erect, dug into my hand, remembering me.

Lenny went ahead of me, up the stone steps into the Whispering Gallery. The great floor of the cathedral was below us. The dark, bare, massive interior, rising to uphold God. Lenny stared down into the nave of St. Paul's, 100 feet below, and above us was the great dome, the famous dome, 32,000 tons lifted 365 feet above the city of London by anonymous men of the seventeenth century. Below us the men of the twentieth century gave thanks, their hosannas ringing upward. The golden choir sang a hymn. I suddenly thought of Murdi's singing "Have you seen the muffin man, the muffin man, have you seen the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane?" I wanted to hear the golden choir sing out Lenny's verse and I told her so. Lenny kissed me, one of those fine wonderful kisses that make you feel that it's a good idea to live forever. She asked me to go over to the far corner of the gallery and to hold my ear against the wall.

I walked around the steep curve of the gallery. Lenny told me I would be 100 feet away from her. I watched her grow more distant as I circled the gallery. I stopped when I was on the other side of the gallery of Lenny. I saw Lenny put her lips to the wall of the gallery and I leaned against the cold stone to listen.

"I love you," Lenny said, "that's enough for you to

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know." The words came clear and distinct out of the stone. "I love you," she repeated. I felt myself begin to tremble. I couldn't stop the trembling. I looked down into the great nave. I had to hold on to the wall to keep from falling down into the hymn of voices. I knew why I was trembling. Lenny's voice was trembling. She was going to tell me something that was no longer words but a part of me, the life we hear in us all our days which is all that we are. I kissed the stone. The stone that would be there long after me. Caught in the stone like the indiscernible tips of a bird's toes that I had picked up in Cotwich from a million years ago. The stone was alive with Lenny's voice. I saw her distant and leaning against the stone and if I could I would have leaped the great circle across the nave. I knew what Lenny was doing. She wanted to give me freedom, whatever that is. But what was I to do with freedom? How do we get the kind of freedom Lenny wanted me to have? Lenny said, "It's not yours or Robert's, it's mine and I hear its voice now the way you hear mine, far yet coming out of me. Do you know what it says, it, for it's still it, it; what a thing life is, it says, it just says that I should be with it and not try to go away, and this is where I have to be."

I went hurrying around the great circle of the gallery. Lenny saw me coming.

"No," she said, "no more talk about it. Let's go up to the top of the gallery."

We went up to the Stone Gallery, the gallery around the dome, the gallery that looked out on London. Lenny looked flushed from the steep climb. The wind blew her hair. She took my hand and led me to see the desola-

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tion from the bombs.

I said good-by to Lenny on the corner of Montague Street. The great blackened hulking museum behind us filled with the chronicle that men pour into every day to read of men who had walked the earth. Lenny gave me her hand, her hand linked to that crude beginning, the *it* voice in her, that would come out of that wonderful furrow that I had entered, into the extraordinary sunlight, the voices of men. Lenny smiled. I smiled at her as best I could. She got into a taxi and was no more gone than the flight of birds.

I walked past the hulking museum, turning toward Tottenham Court Road to go underground, to catch the thundering Underground back to Liverpool Street Station. I bought the *London Times*, crumpling the long black tissue columns. I turned to the news columns and there I saw the news that sealed off the globe and forced us all on the Underground train to finally stare at one another. The bomb had been dropped at 8:45 A.M. over Hiroshima.

Julius Horwitz

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1920, Julius Horwitz attended Ohio State University, Columbia University, and was graduated from The New School for Social Research. In 1920 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for writing. *The City*, a collection of stories and essays about New York City, was published in 1915. In 1920 his novel, *The Inhabitants*, which is read and studied in universities throughout the country, was published. His work has appeared in *Commentary*, *Midstream*, *Contact* and *Look*. "Write down whatever you want to, don't be afraid of those lieutenants reading your mail, words are all we've got on this earth to prove that we're human," Buber says in *Can I Get There By Candlelight*, and that is what Mr. Horwitz is doing now. He is now at work on a new novel. Mr. Horwitz lives in New York City.

